

Article

Symbiotic Relations at Ca' Inua: Farming, Exhibitions, and Social Engagement. A Conversation with the Artist Collective *Panem et Circenses* (Ludovico Pensato and Alessandra Ivul)

Silvia Bottinelli ^{1,*} and Margherita d'Ayala Valva ²

¹ Silvia Bottinelli, Visual and Material Studies Department, School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University, Boston, MA 02115, USA

² Independent Scholar, 57127 Livorno, Italy; mdayalavalva@gmail.com

* Correspondence: silvia.bottinelli@tufts.edu

Abstract: Our contribution discusses the practice of Panem et Circenses (Alessandra Ivul and Ludovico Pensato), an art collective whose work revolves around food and agriculture. After founding Panem et Circenses in Berlin, Ivul and Pensato opened an artist-run exhibition space devoted to food-based practices in Bologna. Since 2017, they have lived at Ca' Inua, a farm in Marzabotto, on the Bologna Apennines. Ivul and Pensato see their experimentation with regenerative and sustainable farming as a form of performance art, an embodiment of their engagement with philosophy and theory. Their work participates in discourses—with a range of variations that build on Indigenous sciences/knowledges, posthumanist and new materialist philosophies, and environmental arts and humanities—that recenter symbiosis, relationality, and human/more-than-human entanglements. Our methodological approach relies on critical, art historical, and visual studies tools and is informed by ethnographic observations on site as well as an interview with the artists published here. We begin to address the specificity of Panem et Circenses' relationship with the lands that they care for and locate their experience in the larger landscape of Art Farming practices. Panem et Circenses translate theoretical frameworks into everyday interactions, hands-on activities, community-building, and long-term planning for the ecology of Ca' Inua.

Keywords: food-based art; farming; posthumanism; Indigenous ontologies; relational art; site-specific art; environmental humanities; Berlin; Bologna; Marzabotto

Citation: Bottinelli, Silvia, and Margherita d'Ayala Valva. 2023. Symbiotic Relations at Ca' Inua: Farming, Exhibitions, and Social Engagement. A Conversation with the Artist Collective *Panem et Circenses* (Ludovico Pensato and Alessandra Ivul). *Humanities* 12: 92. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h12050092>

Received: 28 June 2023

Revised: 19 August 2023

Accepted: 24 August 2023

Published: 1 September 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction: Goals and Context

This text is the outcome of the sustained exchange of two art historians, Silvia Bottinelli and Margherita d'Ayala Valva, with Panem et Circenses (Alessandra Ivul and Ludovico Pensato), an artist collective that has been involved with food aesthetics and practices since 2012. The contribution begins with the genealogy of d'Ayala Valva's initial relationship with the artists, continues with Bottinelli's contextualization of their work within broader discourses on contemporary art farming, and closes with a conversation in which both art historians pose questions to the artists about their current and past projects that involve food and agriculture. The opening paragraphs serve as a tool to frame the interview with the artists, in which their poetics and choices emerge in more detail. At a time in which global trades and industrial agriculture largely dominate food systems, down to individual diets and foodways, Panem et Circenses show a commitment to a more grounded relationship with food and place. Their choice to live off what they and their neighboring communities grow has reconnected them with the bodily experiences of farming, of relating physically to soil, crops, animals, and other humans, with the intention of caring and being cared for in reciprocal and meaningful interactions. Their daily work is paired with a continuous construction of knowledge that is based on thoughtful

reflections and responses to their environment, more than being inspired by specific philosophers or authors. That said, their ethics and poetics align with postwar art movements like Fluxus, which asserted the overlap of art and life, and with posthumanist theories and Indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies that emphasize the necessity of human and other-than-human respect and entanglement.

Having in mind Fluxus artist Joseph Beuys' mantra *Jeder Mensch ein Künstler* meaning "everybody is an artist," and the cooking performances he enacted in his kitchen in 1979, I, Margherita, once met two artists, Rachela Abbate and the late Maria Rebecca Ballestra, collaborating on a then rising project named *Social Soups*. It was 2015, and I had been instinctively attracted to the project for its name, which evoked in my mind the 'primeval soups' by Daniel Spoerri, which, at the time, I was studying by establishing a comparison with Carl Friedrich von Rumohr's treatise. I realized that the two artists were well aware of the gastrosophical issues of the task undertaken, and meeting them connected me with an active network of artists with similar concerns. As a matter of fact, Joseph Beuys is not mentioned here randomly since he had a major role in the development of aesthetic issues about food within the artistic context by simply proposing himself on a TV show of the 1970s as an artist and a culinarily-emancipated male practicing his daily routine of home cooking—with no spectacular implications. And not only did he interpret this new role as an artist, but he was also a pioneering experimenter of agricultural work as a creative and political praxis through his action "Difesa della natura" (in defense of nature) against the capitalistic system of the farming industry, parallel to his political engagement within the *Grüne*.¹ Since then, the practices of farming as an artwork have been developing in what can be today mapped as a network.

As part of this network, I met the collective Panem et Circenses (Alessandra Ivul and Ludovico Pensato), who had been collaborating with *Social Soups* through a residency in the Pigna, the old part of the Ligurian city of Sanremo. In that context, a neighborhood abandoned by locals and populated by communities of immigrants, the aim of the artists' residency was to enact and support relations among the inhabitants through participatory actions with food. This experience (*In sc' i-aa porta*, "on the threshold" in Sanremo's dialect) had all the characteristics of a site-specific and community-building practice because it was elaborated during the artists' coexistence with a diverse group of people, reinforcing networks among new residents by reconsidering the site as a boundary and passage, as well as the concepts of inclusion and exclusion. On the final action, taking place on 25 April—an Italian holiday, a day of freedom and rebirth—a table was set with a *turtun* (a traditional Ligurian pie filled with vegetables, wild herbs, goat cheese, and olives) prepared by the 'outsiders', the two artists Alessandra Ivul and Ludovico Pensato. Food was then a way of bringing together their ideas in a place full of open possibilities.

When I finally met the two artists in Bologna, their experience in La Pigna was over, and they had just launched their new art space in the heart of downtown Bologna, winning a public call for creative endeavors. Their idea was to open their space to a vast number of artistic experiences centered on food as a relational tool. In doing this, they were already working in a relational way, aiming at creating community and stimulating talents to engage with food as a creative and social matter with a site-specific approach. The center's name was CACCA, an acronym for Centro di Arte Contemporanea sulla Cultura Alimentare—a space of twenty-two square meters, left open and available to a vast range of possibilities. This acronym, just like the collective's name Panem et Circenses, revealed through an ironic filter the thoughts of two individuals who had both a strong conceptual approach to food as a cultural medium and authentically practical experiences with manipulating-cooking-sharing food. CACCA questions in a palindromic way the origin and ending of food—where does it come from, where does it go—and if we go through the artists' portfolios, it is remarkable how many of their projects end up with questions. *Eutopos*, for example, was a whole installation based on a "question station" with a corner dedicated to maieutic dialogue, and the issues were: "What does it mean for human beings to exercise their power over nature? Do I really know how much, globally and in

terms of survival, it costs to produce food in the world? Where am “I” within this system? [...] What do we ask ourselves when we talk about food?”. Their attitude was definitely conceptual, political, and eventually optimistic, though not utopian, as we will further elaborate with them.

The chosen name of the collective, Panem et Circenses, also tickled me for its punchiness and because it ironically hinted at the role currently assumed by food, especially in the Italian consumerist system. One should bear in mind that their art space was taking place in the center of Bologna, traditionally defined as “Bologna la grassa” (“Bologna the fat”), a phrase that has now become a brand for touristic purposes. To them, it was *Bologna: City of Food Porn*, the object of a new provocative question and project taking place at a contemporary Art Fair in 2017. The collective was then exploring the ways and the audience of their social critique, tantalizingly exhibiting in a food fair (their project *Eutopos* at “Marca” in Bologna, in 2016), a milieu where they were total outsiders, and in parallel organizing participatory actions with the students of the European Master in History and Food Culture in Bologna. These experiences, along with past involvement with food chains in Berlin, slowly convinced the two artists that to maintain the starting goals of their collective, “to engage others and to be engaged, to refine understanding, to improve as individuals and as members of a community”,² they had to leave Bologna and experience the countryside, to reconnect to the earth and rediscover a sense of community.

They moved to Marzabotto, on the hills of the Bolognese Apennines, where they invested significant funds to build their new home, Ca’ Inua, for their growing family of four. Marzabotto—which does not have a neutral connotation because it evokes to every Italian the memory of a huge massacre committed by the Nazis in 1944—was the chosen place for their rebirth. I met Panem et Circenses once more after a couple of years in Florence, where I had organized a meeting with another collective dedicated to performance and hospitality, Spatula & Barcode (Laurie Beth Clark and Michael Peterson), based in Madison, Wisconsin. The four artists had the opportunity to share thoughts and develop discourses on food and generosity, a main concern for Spatula & Barcode, often realized through playful gifts and takeaways from their performances. I had assumed that two collectives with such similar interests and even a similar sense of humor (Spatula & Barcode still boast of a sarcastic definition attached to them by a scholar: “Blurring the line between the ludic and the ludicrous”) would have some points for an interesting conversation. It was a perfect day—and meal, of course—and I still remember Alessandra’s deep feeling when she explained to us how she had needed to move to the land to maintain an optimistic point of view on the world.

Ca’ Inua started as a new artistic project and has become Alessandra and Ludovico’s life, as well as that of their two daughters. The issue of the overlapping of art and life will be part of the questions posed in the following conversation.

We sit down on big rocks under a canopy of trees, not far from Ca’ Inua: Panem et Circenses involve Margherita and me, Silvia, in a private performance revolving around an intimate dialogue with a small group of people in the company of birds, leaves, and sticks (Figures S5, S6, S9 and S10). Intended as a mid-summer research trip to prepare for this very essay, our study evolves into an experience that—as expected—begins with a question, one that prompts reconsideration of human and more-than-human interdependence: “Are you Aware of your Symbiotic Connection?” The artists pose such a question without assuming a univocal answer, and this generates a process of introspection and deep sharing among the participants. Panem et Circenses borrowed the question from Maori medicine woman Erena Rangimarie Rere Omaki Rhöse, with whom they collaborated while she was in residence at Ca’ Inua, see Petronici (2020, p. 104); Ivul (2020). The Aboriginal framework that the question carries opens possibilities for reimagining relationships with the land, seen as a network of vibrant agents that interact, intersect, and depend on one another rather than as a resource to be used by humans in one-directional ways (Figures S7 and S8). As observed by Potawatomi scientist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer, Indigenous epistemologies, cosmologies, and languages—shaped by close

knowledge and alliances with non-human beings and rooted in specific places—often hinge on the co-dependence of humans and the environments in which they live (see Jones (2022)). While Panem et Circenses' Ludovico Pensato and Alessandra Ivul are not members of Native Nations or communities, their practice amplifies the messages of Rere Omaki Rhöse by participating in a broader set of discourses that recenter symbiosis, relationality, material agency, and human/-more-than-human entanglements as expressed, with a range of seminal variations, by Indigenous science and knowledges, posthumanist and new materialist philosophies, and environmental arts and humanities. (Figures S1–S4).

In her essay for the exhibition catalog of *Symbionts: Contemporary Artists and the Biosphere* at the List Center, MIT (2022–2023), art historian Caroline Jones has shown that awareness about the complex interrelations of people with soil, plants, microbes, and animals is leading inquiries in a range of realms, from Native science to biology, computer science, art history, and philosophy See Jones (2022, pp. 13–49). On a global scale, contemporary artists are embracing collaborations with living materials that are invited to transform and interact under the viewers' eyes through processes that reshape the artists' sense of authorship in order to make space for inter-species co-creation.

For decades, food-based and agriculture-based art have offered fertile grounds to experiment with relational and sensorial interactions with place and matter, as I have argued elsewhere See Bottinelli (2023); see also Benish and Blanc (2023). Since the 1960s, many artists and artist collectives have envisioned farming as a form of art practice that allows dynamic connections with sites and communities, fostered by phenomenological experience, hard labor, collective care, regeneration, and appreciation for cultivated and foraged foods. This ethos and aesthetics thread together a variety of examples, like, just to name a few, Gianfranco Baruchello's *Agricola Cornelia S.p.A* in Lazio, Italy (1973–1981); Bonnie Ora Sherk's *Crossroads Community* in San Francisco, USA (1974–1980); Kamin Lertchaiprasert and Rirkrit Tiravanija's *The Land* outside of Chiang Mai, Thailand (1998–ongoing); Artist as Family (Meg Ulman, Patrick Jones, and their two sons Zephyr and Woody)'s Tree Elbow Farm in Dja Dja Wurrung territories in Australia (2010–ongoing); Nida Sinnokrot's *Sakiya* in Ramallah, Palestine (2007–ongoing); and Frogtown Farm (2013–ongoing) co-founded by Seitu Jones in Minnesota, USA.

The conceptual questions that guide these artists vary depending on the particular contexts in which they operate and on their own personal artistic and political paths. They collectively propose non-invasive, organic, responsive, and responsible forms of agriculture that are creative and facilitate food sovereignty. Often, small-scaled, artist-run farms and agriculture-based practices cannot solve global environmental issues, and yet they provide models of food-systems sustainability that give hope for widespread paradigm shifts. As pointed out by author and curator Marco Scotini, it is the diversity of site-inspired solutions provided by artist-farmers that makes their works valuable tools to address climate change and the environmental crisis in ways that counter standardized and technocratic approaches See Scotini (2019, p. 10).

In many cases, artist farmers are concerned with performative overlaps of art and life that are reflected in the relational nature of their work, and this is the case for Panem et Circenses, as well. The following interview begins to address the specificity of Panem et Circenses' relationship with the lands that they care for at their artist-run farm at Ca' Inua, in the Apennine mountains near Bologna, Italy. The collective's members are deeply engaged with the posthumanist ethos outlined above and see it as a springboard for their practice; that said, their approach is declaredly experiential: there are no specific authors and philosophers that inform their approach. Rather, the artists aim to return to ground zero, learning through direct interaction with plants and animals, seeing the unfolding of local food systems, and articulating new vocabularies and forms of language thanks to perception and relation. A question remains open: In what ways do their specific works embody forms of symbiotic connections? The following interview helps find some answers.

1. Tell us about your background experiences, which are connected to the name of your collective.

Panem et Circenses was born in 2012 in Berlin. We both come from humanities studies, and neither of us attended an art academy or art school. Alessandra has a degree in Philosophy and a postgraduate Master's degree in territorial planning, while I (Ludovico) have a degree in Communication Sciences and a postgraduate Master's in Food History and Culture.

Our common passion for food and cooking led us at first to write a column in a daily newspaper for Italian speakers in Berlin. The column was called precisely "Panem et Circenses". We thought of using Giovenale's famous Latin saying of food and games as a means to "numb" people, but reading it instead from a different angle, one that looks at food as an opportunity for deep multidisciplinary research. At the time, food entertainment had not yet exploded into the mainstream.

During an evening organized by the newspaper's editor, we met a Venetian artist who was looking for a catering provider for the opening event of her solo exhibition. She asked if we would also cook food in addition to writing about it.

We jumped in, and the initial outline of our art project was born.

The beginning and early days were shaped as a "food translation," as we liked to call it: it was about building a relationship with the artist that contracted us, studying their poetics, and finally offering an artistic catering service that would "translate" their artwork into food: the key concept was to exploit the intimate power of food (ingestion as a private and profound act of incorporating the world through the mouth, passing a threshold and bringing inside what is outside) allowing visitors to experience an additional and different way of enjoying artwork.

At some point, it was no longer enough for us to "translate" someone else's artwork; we felt the need to address issues of our own, and so the project became independent.

We could say, then, that the background of Panem et Circenses lies in its very beginnings.

2. Who used to inspire you? Who inspires you today?

Working with food and looking at food as a cultural construct, it was clear to us from the beginning that there were three essential elements in our research and its formalization: interaction, participation, and relationship; a relationship developing across three levels: between participants and the artwork, between participants themselves, and finally between each participant and their self.

Hence, the obligatory path that we went for: from Daniel Spoerri's Eat Art and Allan Kaprow's Happenings to Gordon Matta Clark's relational projects and Antonio Miralda's large-scale staging to the relational art defined by Nicolas Burriaud and magnificently expressed by Rirkrit Tiravanija over all.

The research for our own personal "truth" about food led us to live in the Bologna's Apennines, where our focus gradually shifted from food as a cultural construct to our relationship with the wild (not only the edible wild but the wild understood as an ancestral part of our experience and knowledge of the world, a knowledge we feel should be recovered in order to face contemporary challenges).

At present, our references are in extra-artistic realms (without forgetting the legacy of Beuys) and partly in extra-human realms, so to say, in devoting our attention to inter-species relationships, we are inspired by Mother Earth and each of her emanations. From the great trees of the forest to the microscopic and invisible (to the naked eye) microorganisms that live in the soil, from the wild plants that grow in our fields to the animals that live in our ecosystem, the opportunities and stimuli that come from careful observation of what we have around us are incredible.

3. Can you explain your shift from food art practice to the land? Tell us more about your evolution in the past five years, both through participatory practices experienced as a collective and as individual artists. How do you regard this ongoing process?

Let's start from the latter: in our vision, the quest around the theme of symbiosis and how we can be symbiotic with the ecosystem around us is a quest that interpenetrates our lives and, as such, it is meant to accompany us for as long as we are allowed to be in this world. It is an ongoing process, a process of evolution of humanity, of the soul and spiritual dimension that grows as our interspecies relationship grows. In this sense, art and its imaginative power are the only adequate tools for such a noble and arduous task. We live in a society where we have almost completely delegated our imaginative capacity and, as a result, this organ is atrophying to the point that it is in danger of disappearing; art is the bulwark of imagination, and it is only through imagination that we can see and create all possible worlds capable of counteracting a dystopia that devours everything, just like the famous "Nothing" of *The NeverEnding Story*.

With regards to the first part of the question, as anticipated above, the path that led us to shift our attention to the earth and our relationship with her was, as is often the case, critical, self-critical, and, in a way, painful and not free of frustration (for which we are thankful today). As mentioned, *Panem et Circenses* was born as a research project on Food Culture, but after an initial enthusiastic (even a bit naïve) very material and "gastronomic" approach, we realized that our inner fire was ignited by the possibility of reflecting, experimenting, touching symbolic aspects and deep contents (individual and private ones, as well as collective and public ones), and then combining all of this with the pleasure of translating them with the greatest possible aesthetic and formal care. On the other hand, we were countered by a system (and an audience) that seemed to have very little interest in these aspects (if not even fear of them!) and was rather more attracted by light and easy-to-use content or, at most, to topics that were critical and perhaps even had a political nuance, but in a palatable and diluted way, and were therefore accepted in a mainstream and non-disturbing perspective.

In addition, choosing to work with participatory practices, socially engaged audiences, and site-specific art—which is based on the idea of artists serving the community starting from the question "what is needed? in a given context"—increased the degree of involvement of the context of reference, including people, of course. This increased involvement, which translates into a demand for investment on a personal level by the audience, often required an enormous effort to build a dimension of trust in people to ensure their actual participation, without which the work simply did not exist.

This approach must be considered within the context that characterized the last few years, where food has become one of the favorite objects of global mainstream culture that by its definition, has selectively stripped the container of its content so that narratives can be constructed that run the full range of emotions, offering simple and pret-a-porter solutions to every need, from those who investigate the world hunger to those who protest against climate change, from those who work to "build" food without land, to those who live of reality TV and "food porn".

This phase of our journey ended with a solo exhibition with the significant title "IL CIBO UCCIDE" (FOOD KILLS) infused with criticism and seemingly in the vein of a Dantean "lasciate ogni speranza o voi ch'entrate" (leave all hope, you who enter). In retrospect, we would define it as the need to expel every toxin with which the food system/entertainment had submerged us. A catharsis that coincided with the emergence of a new breath, a renewed hope, and a willingness to look beyond this, beyond humankind and their cultural/artificial intervention that has become manipulative in a consumerist-anthropocentric drift of the wonderful resources of Mother Earth. She has, from the beginning of time, made available and given us unconditionally a very high-quality nourishment that we clearly failed to grasp and embrace, perhaps because of our ego that incessantly demands another kind of nourishment, the kind that can increase in a competitive and non-cooperative, exclusively material and self-referential dimension.

As a matter of fact, in our search for a personal "truth" about food, we have sought and encountered the earth, and it seemed to us that we could not find a better point from which to start again.

From daily contact with her then, a dimension manifested itself in a short time that was not visible to us before, certainly related to the particular conformation and geography of the place where we settled: the wild dimension, not only in relation to food and nourishment for the body.

This is science, and it is history: modern humans are the fruit of seven million years or so of the evolution of our ancestors. Considering that the industrial revolution that led humans to concentrate in urban centers happened a little over two hundred years ago, if we have a rough count, we can say that more or less 99 percent of our time on this planet was spent in a natural environment, much of it before agriculture, a wild environment to be precise.

Now, *Panem et Circenses* (and the age-old question returns as to whether we should continue to keep this name so dissonant with the evolution of our research, but for now, so be it) investigates, works, lives in this research and moves above all through a question that has become the statement of our collective, “Are You Aware Of Your Symbiotic Connection?” (Figures S11 and S12).

Beyond humans, then, but to return to humans, yet *new humans* who recognize and live in a daily interspecies dimension and relationship, aware that all beings are part of a union, seamlessly integrated and connected. *New humans* for new forms of community and collectivity where we live (in an all-encompassing Jungian sense of activity aimed at the realization of our divine nature) side by side with all beings: what better tool than art could guide this transition?

4. You chose to establish your agricultural practice in Marzabotto, on the Apennine mountains, in Emilia Romagna, Italy. Marzabotto is not a neutral site, having witnessed a painful massacre of local populations by the Nazis in 1944. What is your specific connection to this place, considering its difficult and complex history?

We chose to move to this area of the Bologna’s Apennines because we already had a small daughter, and it was home for us. Ludovico had been visiting it since he was very young because part of his “family” spends the summer period here, and together we had many meaningful experiences, including our coexistence, in these mountains. It was immediately clear to us from the first days after our move that, yes, these woods, these farms, are not a neutral zone. It is impossible to live here and not consider the weight of the recent past, so tremendous, ruthless, and dark. A few steps from the farm, on the road leading to the valley, a plaque remembers the names of seven men shot by the Nazi Fascists in 1944. One of them is the grandfather of Costantino, our neighbor. Costantino is our master chestnut grower, the one who taught us everything we know about the art of caring for, pruning, and grafting fruit chestnut trees according to the traditions of these mountains. In our chestnut grove is the skeleton (what little is left of it after repeated rations from war memorabilia collectors) of an old Allies truck that the British troops used to transport medicine and food stock (accidentally, not weapons or troops but medicine and food, on the *Panem et Circenses* farm); it was again Costantino to tell us what that carcass was, at first glance, it seemed simply an old abandoned tractor box to us. Costantino is not only our master chestnut farmer; he is the memory of these places and one of our duties here is not to let this memory disappear, not only memories of pain but also memories of the wonder when, for example, his shepherd father would move just a little bit of soil with his fingers and gush the water from which the sheep drank in a little valley between two walnut trees where over the years the landscape has changed, the climate has changed, and now brambles protect the soil from the drought that comes again every year punctually and with increasing force. The war of men and between men was fought at gunpoint, but also the “war” that men have waged on Nature, and that has been a major contributor to the climate change that we seem to be watching helplessly. By living here, with art and a new community that is being born, we transform this memory into a constructive dwelling based on love and a paradigm of a different nature, more than intercultural, beyond, we call it “interspecies”. Monte Sole, the site of one of the most heinous massacres of

World War II, is in front of us, across the Reno River down in the valley, on the other ridge; on 25 April, the sound of drums partying reaches us here.

5. How do you trace your artistic and life experience as artists and as a family? More specifically, how has gender identity affected your relationship with philosophy, food art, and farming?

In our lives, we try to apply many of the principles of permaculture, one of them being “integrate instead of separate”. We integrate art to life and family life to art. In a society where this principle is not followed by everyone and where children are often considered synonymous with disruption and hindrance to adult work, it is not always easy to sustain our approach, especially in the case of commissioned work. Our daughters have often participated in art residencies together with us, in the study and research phases, in some cases even in the performances and realizations of the artworks. Since we have been living here and they are growing up, the application of this principle also makes clear the position we have chosen to maintain in their education and how it also then falls back on and takes part in every reflection on art and living.

We live in an interconnected unicum; we wear different hats and have different occupations (parents, homemakers, artists, farmers, factors, builders, designers, graphic designers, receptionists, hosts ...), but we are an individual, unique personality, intimately interconnected, not only to family, community, human society but also to the ecosystem, plants, forest, animals and microorganisms. We are made of the same substance; separation is a great pitfall of this age.

Ludovico and I, Alessandra, as a couple, we live family and work very fluidly; both of us take care of the house, the girls, and work, from working in the fields to working in the art collective. The girls’ early years (including pregnancies), farming, and self-making made clear biological and role differences between the feminine and masculine in the couple. In the early days, girls need mothers (pregnancy, childbirth, and choice of breastfeeding), and the land calls for hard labor where the physical difference was felt. Apart from these practical aspects, there are and have been artistic works where we have brought into play the feminine and masculine. It was, however, a matter of having wanted to address gender issues as much as to manifest different aspects of the energies that coexist within each of us.

6. What are some of the social structures and logistical challenges that inform your choice to become an agricultural cooperative and receive certifications? How does the reality of administrative and economic hurdles affect your conceptual frameworks of “art equals life”?

Experience is the basis from which to start, always. Without direct experience, there is no knowledge. Dialoguing and entering the mechanisms of institutions brings along, like all things, pros and cons. When we founded the farm as an artistic device, there was the intention that it would be a real institution that would act in the world according to established norms; to do that, we needed to go through it to have experience. So we established the farm, duly registered it, and also decided to learn about the world of agricultural regulations based on calls and subsidies. We participated in, won, and benefited from European Union calls for proposals to support young agricultural settlements, with all the advantages, constraints, and burdens that this entails. At the same time, we have always closely followed the movement of Campi Aperti and Genuino Clandestino, movements fighting for food sovereignty that have been active in the Bologna area since the 1980s with self-certification, farmers’ markets, political and social actions. Unfortunately, these two dimensions are, at the moment, infinitely distant; where movements from below seek dialogue, institutions deny it or choose to unilaterally write the script.

Our experience within the social, economic, and political context of Emilia-Romagna under European supervision pushes us today toward a gradual exit from this world of regulations and controls that cannot allow a freedom of action in choosing truly innovative and experimental agricultural practices and land and plant care. In essence, an artistic

approach to agriculture and land care is irreconcilable with industry rules and regulations designed and written from a capitalist production perspective where the only determining variable is quantity (or at least what is “objectively measurable”) and regulatory structures are reins and constraints that leave very little room (to be optimistic) for alternative, non-aligned visions.

7. In agriculture, the experience of failure and frustration is an almost constant issue. Is Ca’ Inua—as a project and art experience—a form of utopia, or better eutopia? What are the limits of utopia as a framework, and what can be gained by focusing on process rather than idealized perfection?

While we did not come to the land with such a romantic and naïve approach, we did come up against frustration, fatigue, endless labor hours, missing skills, necessary and constant investment, and natural feedback constantly contrary to expectations. We came here thinking we could aspire to a synthesis of art and agriculture, or rather, thinking we could put agriculture at the service of art as a tool for caring for the land and relationships. We have also had positive experiences in this regard, but today, we believe that the basic “mistake” has been to frame agriculture (natural, organic, symbiotic, syntropic ...) as an *exclusive* mode of land care. Today, we are dissociating these two concepts and these two practices. Agriculture (good agriculture) is necessary for us to eat. We can limit, almost zero out, the harm of its action by choosing good practices that mimic natural systems that are aware of the forces at play in a regenerative vision. In time, it may also become a practice with a positive impact, but, at least in its initial stages, it works against the natural development of wild forces and therefore requires energy, in some cases, a lot of energy (time, money, skills) to counter/contain them and make its action prevail, which presupposes cultural choices and directions.

Art is the tool through which to achieve reconnection with Mother Earth and the subtle world.

We no longer seek a synthesis between art and agriculture, but rather, we split the two by trying to do good agriculture on the one hand and by bringing art back to the center of our action as a tool for relating to the natural ecosystem. We are aware that today, our tool for caring for the earth is art, precisely “socially engaged” art (whereby “socially” we mean in an interspecies society) whose answer to the question “what is needed” is to offer people the opportunity to connect with themselves and with Mother Earth. The theme of care, of symbiosis, is developed in this sense. It involves an animic dimension, of beauty, of intuition, of nurturing an ancestral part that is only dormant in us and that we can awaken by constantly working and training trust with respect to what we feel is “good”.

The utopian framework is likely to be limiting, but we, in truth, do not question whether our action is utopian or not; we act for what we feel is right and just according to a non-anthropocentric but cooperative and unified vision that seeks to keep itself radically connected to a present dimension of action.

8. Beyond growing food, does foraging play a role in your practice, and if so, why?

The wild is increasingly becoming our resource, a road back home. As we said at the outset, the time humans have lived in urban or urbanized settings is nothing compared to their life in the woods, and this makes us speak with certainty and firmness of a homecoming when it comes to considering any action “wild”. This approach often makes us feel inadequate, small, ignorant, and weak. At any time of the year (following the zodiac, the seasons, the natural powers), the forest, the meadows, and the trees make different nutrients available to us in different forms: roots, bark, grasses, fruits, mushrooms, flowers that can serve for our nourishment as well as for our care. I recently read a short story about the life of a tribe of trees, written by a great scientist, and there is a fundamental part that says, roughly, that nature does not work to maintain a balance but rather works constantly to rebalance imbalances. We have an opportunity to learn this and use it in our favor. An ancient knowledge that every day we are in danger of losing access to as our

physical distance from natural contexts increases. Here is where our artwork pulses; here is the key to interspecies relationship, to contact, to symbiosis, to the recomposing of a lost unity.

9. How do you choose to communicate your land-based and food-based aesthetics? Who are your publics of reference?

Our work is currently located outside the so-called “art system”. The relational performances, the collective actions we continue to perform here at Ca’ Inua, are aimed at communities (activity associations aimed at families with children in parental education, social and cultural centers, informal mountain spaces, and women’s and men’s circles) who live here in this slice of the Apennines or who come here in search of it. The commissioned works we have been engaged with in recent years fall into hybrid areas where contemporary art is used in extra-institutional situations to activate participatory thought processes and communities that become primary referents of the work. *Dulcis in fundo*, and we continue to stress this at the risk of sounding fanatical, among our primary referents are the beings of Mother Earth, the plants, trees, animals, the invisible peoples (or such for us) who live like and together with us in the same places where people live.

10. After five years since you began the Ca’ Inua project, is making an assessment possible? Is your newly-found connection to a remote land creating challenges for the cultivation of relationships with other humans—for example, peer artists and friends sharing a similar vision regarding the overlapping of art and life—who are mostly based far from you?

Yes, after these first five years, we feel that it is time for a new evolution, a transformation, especially in the key of curing and sharing collectively.

As already mentioned, this first phase of “settlement” is closing with the consideration of bringing art back to the center of our lives after five years in which the relationship with the land developed almost exclusively (and necessarily) through agricultural practices: we rediscovered a thread that had been lost, overwhelmed by the energy and opulence of nature and by an illusory as much as unsuccessful attempt to keep it under control; we rediscovered that our focus is art as the main tool to seek symbiosis with the ecosystem and to establish an action of caring for the land and people through the relationship with it.

In 2016 and 2017, we had a powerful and beautiful experience in Bologna with the foundation and creation of the space CACCA (Center for Contemporary Art on Food Culture-Centro per l’Arte Contemporanea sulla Cultura Alimentare in Italian), our shared studio and place for research and experimentation. In those years, we also held within it and circulated in the neighborhood a magazine entitled EUTOPIA—artistic practices around food places that do not exist...yet. The research center itself was an artistic operation. Today, here, in the mountains, into the woods, we want to repeat a similar experience, indeed one that we consider even better thanks to the support of such a powerful ally as Nature. We feel ready for an upgrade of this experience. Our intention is to found and create here a stable space for interspecies ecosystemic relations where artists from all over the world can converge to work and investigate this dimension by working in relation with the specific ecosystem of Ca’ Inua on the basis of a few shared fundamental assumptions, the main being the recognition of the animic and spiritual dimension of beings.

We will soon write a call for artists-in-residence on this basis.

We envision one day Ca’ Inua with a contemporary art park where the works are the result of interspecies collaboration.

11. Do you perceive a necessary separation between urban and rural, or is this binary a cultural construct, in your opinion?

In our work on symbiosis, during the assembly, some participants often tell us that they cannot have a relationship with the rest of the non-human because they live in the city. Other participants or ourselves report, not in response, but as a shared reflection, that nevertheless, even though we live in the city, oxygen, water, food, medicine, fuel, and

textile fibers come from the plant world, from ecosystems: they are the so-called “ecosystem services”. There is not necessarily a disconnect because you live in the city; conversely, there is definitely no connection just because you live in the country. It is about wanting and choosing. It is about undertaking a process and using the tools that you have available to you in the context in which you live. The uses, rituals, dynamics, and activities will be different, but that does not change the substance.

In our case, we felt strongly necessary to live close to a forest, to so much forest; it is as if we answered and followed a call: whether it came from deep within us or from the forest outside is a false dualism because the two entities in a certain worldview coincide. To be able to rejoice in the closeness of the forest, to see the stars at night, but also to be isolated for days because of great snowfalls or to see the suffering of plants in the continuation of the increasingly frequent and long summer droughts; to be in the rhythm of the sun and the seasons, to modify our lifestyle in relation to all this in order to experience it more and more directly and adherently, to be able to get closer, to sense and perhaps, who knows, one day to know the natural forces more closely and steadily, was our choice. One of the infinite possible (for those fortunate enough to be able to choose, of course) and non-binary choices between city/country.

12. The world’s population is increasingly urban and disconnected from the land. In some nations, large parts of the countryside are becoming the preserve of the rich. Poorer locals are being forced to move away, continuing a long historical process of dispossession. At the same time, moving to the countryside, let alone owning their own land, is impossible for many. Does this apply to Ca’ Inua’s context in Italy as well? How does the work of Panem et Circenses speak to these issues? How does it intersect with class-based politics?

We would like to clarify one main aspect of our approach: it is not an antagonist one. We are not fighting *against* something—urbanism, in this case—because we wish to consider ourselves as striving *for* something else, which is an inter-species relationship. This can be established, developed, and made aware of regardless of where a person lives. We do not draw a connection between the urban space and evil and between the rural space and good because there are many ways of experiencing inter-species relationships.

We do not approach our work from a socio-political point of view because this dimension is uninfluential (inexistent) in terms of inter-species relationships. To those who do not have access to or do not own farmland, we care about showing the possibility of connecting to the natural realm, which each person can enact and experiment with in any context, even more so in an urban one. We do not wish to propose our choice as a model to be followed, nor do we imagine a global return to the land.

Also, there may be contextual differences among countries: fortunately, farming property remains available to a broader population in Emilia Romagna, even if moving to rural sites is not without hurdles. However, our main point is not to advocate for a separation of urban and rural but rather to prompt a reconsideration of the interactions of human and non-human beings in any environment in order to develop an appreciation for the ways that we are intertwined and co-dependent. In these terms, our work is to trigger an inner dimension of awareness, not to propose an external and political reading; this may be the consequence, not the starting point.

13. In a nutshell, how would you define your approach to the politics of food, from cultivation to consumption and composting, in the context of present food systems?

We produce some of the food we eat and some of it we buy from other producers in the area; with a buying group that is headed by organic companies outside the big retailers, we stock up on non-perishables in quantity; as a last resort, when needed, we go to a local organic store and only for very few products (generally non-food) we happen to go to the supermarket. Our waste goes to the animals, dogs, and chickens and then to the land. In life, we apply a common sense policy without being rigid or dogmatic. We live in a world where the food system is sick; we do the best we can, but we are part of it.

Our vision regarding cultivation is that we should start again by acquiring skills in Ecosophy and Agroecology with the goal of not shifting our current focus and efforts to develop landless crops (or even on other planets!) but by employing our best technologies, heart, and imagination to help regenerate the one we have, choosing to build non-dystopian visions that if continually reaffirmed can only end up happening.

From a politics of food perspective, we feel very close to the peasant movements for food SOVEREIGNTY, which here in the Bologna area are (as mentioned above) highly developed and active in the rural network of CAMPI APERTI.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/h12050092/s1>, Figures S1–S4. Panem et Circenses, “Let’s Rain,” collective action/performance to make it rain, Ca’Inua, Marzabotto, 2017. Figures S5 and S6. Panem et Circenses, “Are You Aware Of Your Symbiotic Connection?” – Public assembly under and around trees. Collective action and site-specific installation, Pieve di Cadore, 2019. Figure S7. Panem et Circenses, “Siamo Tutti Fango e Luce” (We Are All Mud and Light), site-specific installation, Torre di Mosto, 2020. Panels symbolize species living in the water by the dewatering pump construction. Figure S8. Panem et Circenses, “Sul Limite della Memoria” (On the verge of memory), Interactive and site-specific installation, Torre di Mosto, 2020. Participants lift, carry, and reposition the blue poles to connect three installations located across the landscape of a drained swamp. Figures S9 and S10. Panem et Circenses, “Are You Aware Of Your Symbiotic Connection?”, Public assembly under and around trees. Collective action, Lana, 2020. Figures S11 and S12. Panem et Circenses, “Are You Aware Of Your Symbiotic Connection?” – Wall Drawing, Eraclea, 2020.

Author Contributions: S.B. and M.d.V. contributed to all phases of research and writing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: Supported by Tisch College for Civic Life, Tufts University, Faculty Fellows Program.

Acknowledgments: We are grateful to Alessandra Ivul and Ludovico Pensato, who provided responses to the interview questions, and to Nicola Perullo for inviting us to contribute to this issue.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

1. See the varied version: (Lemke 2007, pp. 62–63).
2. See the artists’ statement: (Petronici n.d.).
3. Kimmerer (2014, pp. 209–10) and throughout.

References

- (Benish and Blanc 2023) Benish, Barbara L., and Nathalie Blanc. 2023. *Art, Farming and Food for the Future: Transforming Agriculture*. London: Routledge.
- (Bottinelli 2023) Bottinelli, Silvia. 2023. *Artists and the Practice of Agriculture. Politics and Aesthetics of Food Sovereignty in Art Since 1960*. London: Routledge.
- (Ivul 2020) Ivul, Alessandra. 2020. “Are you Aware of your Symbiotic Connection?” Filmed 22 October 2020, at TEDxBologna, Italy, Video, 10:46. Available online: https://www.ted.com/talks/alessandra_ivul_are_you_aware_of_your_symbiotic_connection (accessed on 18 June 2023).
- (Jones 2022) Jones, Caroline. 2022. Symbiontics: A Polemic for Our Time. In *Symbionts: Contemporary Artists and the Biosphere*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- (Kimmerer 2014) Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2014. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions.
- (Lemke 2007) Lemke, Harald. 2007. *Die Kunst des Essens. Eine Ästhetik des kulinarischen Geschmacks*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- (Petronici n.d.) Petronici, Silvia. n.d. “Panem et Circenses: Art Practice on and about Food”. Available online: <http://panemetcircens.es/en/profile/> (accessed on 18 June 2023).
- (Petronici 2020) Petronici, Silvia, ed. 2020. *ArteBonificaCampagna*. Portogruaro: PSLArte.
- (Scotini 2019) Scotini, Marco, ed. 2019. *Politiques de la végétation. Pratiques artistiques, stratégies communautaires, agroécologie*. Paris: Eterotopia Parcours.

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.