

SAY MY NAME AND I WILL TELL YOU MY STORY

A project by Evgenia Emets & Inês Valle

“When we learn to listen to plants without the need to hear them speak, a language that we have forgotten emerges ... This language belongs to plants, and so do the stories...”

– Monica Gagliano

The long term art project ‘SAY MY NAME AND I WILL TELL YOU MY STORY’ explores memories, narratives, and stories of trees- from their indigenous wisdom and meanings to their use in contemporary Western society. This exhibition presents newly commissioned works made by artist Evgenia Emets and curated by Inês Valle. They are inspired by research on trees and forests, where we dive into the artist’s relationship with the Eucalyptus family in Portugal, to explore the link between nature’s biodiversity, human language, and culture, as well as, narratives around the (de)colonization of nature. In parallel, a series of free online conversations will happen with experts in which we discuss plant intelligence and communication, indigenous knowledge, and the intangible heritage of forests.

How does a tree feel?

How do trees share their stories?

How can we listen to the trees?

In the upcoming next pages you will find a few of the initial questions made to the artist, the curator, and to a Eucalyptus tree, about their current perception of the arts, the project, and how they see it evolving in the upcoming years.

Evgenia to Inês: How do you think art is changing in current times and how is its role shifting?

Inês: This is a subject that is recurrently asked through times in which change is perceived and an unfamiliarity in emotion settles upon us all. When this question is asked to art curators, historians, artists, and thinkers, the only possible answer is that we all have our assumptions and predictions and that these are influenced by our personal beliefs and/or external fashionable ideas. However, these assumptions are always metamorphosing in reaction to or alongside peripheral socio and political circumstances affecting our global daily lives. Moreover, the word ‘changing’ somehow presupposes an unfamiliar component of our comprehension of what is happening in the moment of the “now” and is “new”. Answering to suppositions will therefore never be precise, and I will probably never satisfy you with my answers. This is because we usually need some distance - “time” - to deeply understand what is happening in the “now.” The ‘unknown’ being the excitement and fear that we thrive on – why else would we feel suspense when an enchantress uncovers her crystal ball to unveil our future? Isn’t this the feeling you had, when you tried to imprint your first leaf – a mix of feelings in the expectation of matching your imagination to the physical outcome of the work?

What I could say is that today we are being imprinted with the feeling of fear, with real-time charts counting how many people are dying in the world, how resources are being stretched and misplaced, as well as, how the freedom of being in a community is shrinking in our societies – thus undoubtedly we are forced to move to our inwards, to our inner being which is commonly neglected. In this confinement period, the importance of the arts and its contribution to our well-being is evident. How would you have survived the lockdown, if you hadn’t had art offer you some moments of joy – like the sound of music, the words of poetry, or the stories in the cinema? If you think deeply enough about this, it might be possible to say that instead of the arts changing with the time, we change because of the arts.

The power of art lies with the fact that it is probably one of the few areas in our society where we come together to share an experience even if we do not believe or agree on the same things. Moreover, when art has the power to move and transport us to new places we are uprooted from our physical bodies and allow a “spiritual” or transformative experience to bond with our inner self and activate a series of elements that make the “new and unknown” shock us into this so-called “change”. Thus, I wouldn’t say that the role of art is changing, but humans might be, and consequently what we will share from this inner transformation will be by creating art that connects to what we believe can be shared with a world external to us.

Inês to Evgenia: Why are you excited about doing this art project? And how do you understand my role as curator and collaborator in it?

Evgenia: I am discovering several aspects in my life, which could have appeared totally unbelievable to me even a few months ago, namely: plant communication and plant intelligence, plant medicine and healing through interaction and contemplative practice with plants, a possibility of equal, collaborative, artistic practice with any other-than-human living being, deepening my perception of ecology.

I have a feeling that this is a long-term project which could contribute to the appreciation of the Eucalyptus genus in general and in relation to its more regenerative place in the ecosystem in places such as Portugal and Spain, where they have a problematic presence. I would like to open a holistic perspective on this tree and its possible long-term regenerative place in the ecosystems and in a wider sense of shifting our perception of ecology from human-centred to multi-centred, multi-species.

As for our work together with yourself as a curator, I feel a deep affinity in our collaboration, in the way we connect various aspects of the process and the project, in the way

we always bring a multidisciplinary angle, which creates a solid basis and inspiration for the artistic research but also enriches the thinking, dreaming and creative process and allows a wonderful exchange of ideas among multiple people.

Yesterday, when we were installing the show, I was amazed by your dynamism, rhythm and capacity to reimagine the space. When I shared with you the idea of working with Eucalyptus originally, I was hoping that I could share with you the love and fascination for this wonderful tree that is present in my life, but I am fascinated to see how we have opened a door to whole new possibilities and that we are already walking these paths together. With your interest in aboriginal art and culture, the capacity to draw people into the circle, and curiosity to go deeper, I feel incredibly supported and comfortable in this collaboration. Perhaps, the Eucalyptus tree made us meet?

I see your role as a curator in this project as creating an overview effect, letting the project evolve into its depth, but also expanding the project by engaging with multidisciplinary angles, supporting in creating new collaborations with researchers, scientists, aboriginal people, reaching out to new audiences, across countries and continents, and engaging them into the conversation. And I am happy to see how much you are enjoying this process.

Inês to Evgenia: Where did your fascination for forests come from? And how is the eucalyptus connected or /and has contributed to that vision?

Evgenia: My fascination with the forests came from the experience of the absence of old-growth forests, especially here in Portugal. For the last 3 years, since I moved to Portugal, I have been working on the Eternal Forest project, which started as an artistic investigation of the impacts of human activity causing deforestation and monocultures, while raising awareness about the urgency of restoring biodiversity and forest ecosystems. I arrived at the point when I realised that this was not enough. Last year Eternal

Forest embraced a need for creating physical spaces for reconnecting humans and nature, in the form of Eternal Forest Sanctuaries.

About 10 months ago I had a dream of a sacred Eucalyptus tree and received communication in that dream that the Eucalyptus family wants to collaborate and that the trees have messages they want to pass to the people. Eucalyptus trees- everyone knows them in Portugal- are not exactly revered and appreciated: they are quick cash for some and a source of huge disappointment for others, being planted to a large extent as a monoculture in this country. So the message went in but it was not until the beginning of Covid-19 that messages started coming one after the other. The trees continued talking to me, every time I went through the Eucalyptus plantation down my usual forest path near my house. Then I started working with yourself in Summer 2020, and somehow it became clear that the project will be around Eucalyptus. I started collecting materials like leaves, seed pods and bark to experiment in the studio and then with additional research I tried the technique of printing on fabric directly with leaves and bark. In this way, I offer the trees a voice and let them speak through my art. This is how this phase of the project was completed, following the invitation of the Eucalyptus tree, in a way of intuition, learning and surrendering to it.

Evgenia to Inês: I am aware of your interests and knowledge in Indigenous Arts & Culture, I wonder how working on this project excites you (current & upcoming phases)? Why is it important to you? And how does this project connect with your studies of aboriginal art & culture?

Inês: The title of our project that we agreed to use “Say my name and I will tell you my story” to me not only connects with the subject that we are researching but also with some of the premises that made me create The CERA PROJECT in the first place. It is deeply related with issues about the decolonization of history- what is history, who should write it and how we all relate and/or connect with it. Additionally,

having the privilege of working with nature and with you, on a project of this dimension, where I will be able to merge some of my passions, interests, and learning in the process is quite a fantastic opportunity.

These initial stages, where we take Portugal as a premise and how it connects with other cultural landscapes, is quite promising. Firstly because the Eucalyptus is a sensitive/taboo subject in Portugal – a tree that people usually associate with death, loss, fire – due to the constant fires that happen every year in the country due to the monoculture plantations. Secondly because we are researching the connection and travels of these trees and how their story could be re-told to debunk presuppositions. Thirdly, because of the several conversations, we will be able to bring people from different parts of the world and fields of research (science, culture, etc) to share their experiences and knowledge with us and with everyone who is interested in this subject. Fourthly, because this project will allow me to reconnect again with Australia and some of the amazing knowledgeable people over there, which consequently will share some of their rich and ancient indigenous knowledge with all of us. Lastly, we will be using the most powerful languages to communicate and connect with people – Art and Nature. How fantastic is this?

Inês to Evgenia: As you know, the cosmic visions of indigenous peoples about life and all that surround them is deeply rooted in their relation with nature and a strong belief in the spiritual world – in dreams they connect with other entities and realms. How do dreams impact and/ or influence your artistic practice?

Evgenia: Directly and indirectly. Sometimes I receive a message in a dream, an image, a situation, which becomes the heart of the poem. These powerful symbolic dreams are often the beginning of new works: it could be a line of a poem, a theme, a name for a project.

This is how I wrote Eternal Forest Manifesto last year and this is how the ‘Say my name and I will tell you my story’ project was inspired by a dream. But I do not believe that

dreams are just some kind of glitches of reality or some scraps, that our imagination remixed together and presents in a new format. I do agree with the cultures and individuals which defend the power of the dreams to create our waking reality.

I think our Western civilisation has unlearned to dream, having cut the rational from the intuitive and I feel this is the time we are called to reconnect the pieces of our continuum - the dream time and the waking time.

I love dreaming and I practice Dream Yoga and Lucid Dreaming, and the more I do, the more detailed, vivid and realistic the dreams are: I can change things, I can recognise I am dreaming and control my responses in my dreams, I remember my dreams in details and am able to recognise patterns I need to work with. Also, I am getting powerful inspiration for my art by focusing more on the dream world, as it bypasses the rational mind, and works with intuition, so I allow myself to create from a deeper space of being.

Inês to Evgenia: Art & sustainability & spirituality - what does it mean to you? And do you think your work fits in these terminologies?

Evgenia: So here you are asking two separate questions.

First one: art & sustainability. For me this question is about time - can we look at art from the long-term perspective? How does art that I make affect people who are here now but also how can it create longer-lasting effects on society? I do not necessarily mean that I am interested in creating art that can last long in its material form. Perhaps it is something ephemeral, or something that will ultimately go back to the soil, but that transmits the feeling of time, the beauty of ageing and timelessness simultaneously.

Working with natural materials - be it materials that the forests offer, or natural dyes, which also interest me, - we

almost always have to work with the idea of death and rebirth, the idea of regeneration. It is a real pleasure to create something that completes the cycle of life, be it through a material, through an artistic process, through a collaboration with a living being, that offers itself, like a leaf, a rock, a piece of wood.

Second one: art & spirituality. It is almost never talked about anymore, almost never mentioned in the art circles, almost a taboo. Yet, we forget that art can be a deep spiritual practice in its own right. I would say it is always available in this form, but there is a trick to not get attached to the result of this practice. For example, sometimes there is a flow and it reflects in the artwork. But sometimes the art is difficult, the energy is difficult when you look at it when you experience it. Yet, during the process, I would have gone through a deep transformation, broken through an old pattern, released something ancient and deeply rooted. If the process can be captured and art be created to be shared with others, it is a bonus. But generally, every day can be approached like this - every work of art is part of the every-day practice, simple, focused and persistent.

Question to an Eucalyptus tree: There are so many of you in Portugal, in Europe and around the world. Why are you here, and what is your purpose?

Eucalyptus tree: We are here to hold the space between the worlds, the Sky and the Earth, but also between the human worlds, separated by your different cultural beliefs, but also united by your common ancestry. We are here as keepers of the dream space, which is always available for you to enter and learn to live with the Planet Earth in a harmonious way and to co-create with non-human beings.

If you are reading this, share your questions with us – what you would like to ask a Eucalyptus tree or if you have received an answer from a tree, please send us the answer as well!

/ ARTIST
Evgenia Emets

/ EXHIBITION
22.10 – 06.11.20

/ ONLINE TALK
29/OCT.
Plant intelligence and plant communication

/ CURATOR
Inês Valle

/ VENUE
Espaço Espelho D'ÁGUA,
Av. Brasília, 1400-038,
Lisbon, Portugal

03/NOV
Eucalyptus: Indigenous knowledge

05/NOV
The intangible heritage of forests

// INFO

MARIADIAS@MI6.PT
+351 919 091 061 | +44 758 702 8845

#VENTOSULART

WWW.CERAPROJECT.COM
WWW.ESPACOESPELHODAGUA.COM