

# **so CLOSE**

Publication  
Series



**VOL.3**

**Social innovation  
that moves us  
beyond... horizon**



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Enhancing Social Cohesion  
through Sharing the Cultural Heritage  
of Forced Migrations

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# **SO-CLOSE**

## **Publication Series**

**VOL. 3      Social innovation that moves us beyond... horizon**  
Dominika Kasprowicz and Karolina Hess (eds.)

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# Social innovation that moves us beyond... horizon

## – introductory word

Dominika Kasprowicz, PhD



Social innovation, the term popular in recent years among politicians and economists, brings with it a number of challenges of both academic and practical nature.

This concept, known, variously interpreted and used on the basis of the social sciences, today is becoming synonymous with newness evaluated positively, focused on the micro- and macro-social effects. It is a response to a specific change in the economic paradigm and embodiment of the idea of social interaction. This is particularly evident in the EU, which, as an international political institution not only contributed to the conceptualization of the term but also its active promotion. Social innovation is a formula clearly developing in EU legislation and having a growing share when it comes to specific financial activities of its institutions.

But for many years it was not a case. Innovation and innovativeness have been of interest to many academic disciplines, but the theoretical framework of the phenomenon remained fuzzy. The same is true of the increasingly popular term ‘social innovation’ in public discourse. The concept dates back to the 19th century and has since evolved, taking on new meanings added with the development of economies, societies and (social) sciences. However, this new quality has not always been treated in unambiguously positive terms. Going back to the conceptualisation of ‘innovation’ made in sociology, where the early sociological works of authors such as Max Weber and Robert K. Merton are crucial in this respect, we can see a significant evolution in the understanding of the term. Weber linked the specific type of social behaviour that innovation was considered to be to changes in



social structure and the labour market. When analysing social phenomena and their change, he also described those that went beyond the social norm, in other words, social innovation was for him an example of behaviour that constituted a social aberration especially in societies with a non-Protestant work ethos (Weber, 1994: 144-148). Innovation in the Mertonian sense, meant the rejection of institutional practices while maintaining cultural goals. They were treated as a unique example where common (social) goals are achieved through ‘new’ social solutions/institutions (Merton, 2002: 197-224). As can be seen, although in classical sociological texts ‘innovations’ had negative and sometimes destructive connotations for society, their important role in the process of social change that took place in a given social set-up through ‘innovative solutions’ in the broadest sense remains crucial.

The modern understanding of the term innovation, replaces historical threats with ‘opportunity’ and treats them more in terms of ‘desirable aberrations’ of social behaviour, which are supposed to take organised forms and are even fostered by institutional (political) arrangements. In keeping with the modern, interdisciplinary convention therefore we can understand social innovation as the phenomenon of the emergence of new solutions (procedures, products, ideas) to social issues/needs, accompanied by social exchange and cooperation, taking institutionalised forms (e.g. social enterprises).

A key role in the process of social innovation play social entrepreneurs who are intended to help in coping with social challenges and crisis facing the EU. Among that group – artists and representatives of creative sectors play an important role. Those groups can and should be seen as a source of new conceptualizations and interpretations of the challenges Europe is facing in the beginning of the XXIst century. Therefore the aim of this publication is to present a set of good practices as well as practical inputs provided by experts who took part in the project titled: *SO-CLOSE. Enhancing Social Cohesion through Sharing the Cultural Heritage of Forced Migrations*. The ambitious mission of the project was to contribute to social cohesion and fight refugee marginalization or exclusion by facilitating the encounters between similar life stories, through the mediation of innovative digital and artistic tools.

Based on theories of cultural heritage-making, exposing the commonalities of past and present experiences, listening to the target groups’ needs and through the development of a methodology template of co-creative design of replicable digital tools and cultural products, SO-CLOSE experts aimed in improving social cohesion and promoting mutual understanding between refugees and their local communities.

Working at the intersection of history, sociology, cultural studies, art and computer science, designing educational and cultural tools like interactive documentaries based on



immersive video recording, virtual exhibitions based on personal memories and storytelling or an online platform, named Memory Center a content aggregator and services platform, it all would not be possible without co-creation and an open attitude of the participants of the project, as well as their experiences.

I am sure that sharing with wider audience that part of the SO-CLOSE project's experience will be helpfull in exploring and adjusting the digital tools to the needs of institutions, NGOs and local communities – everyone interested in finding a peaceful and innovative solutions to the great social challenges we, Europeans, we humans face.



# When the masterpiece is your sight in life – Monte Sole Peace Foundation's story map and virtual exhibition

Elena Monicelli



The Peace School Foundation of Monte Sole (Monte Sole), created in 2002, has its registered office and operating facilities in the Historical Park of Monte Sole. Its aim is to promote training and peace education projects, non-violent conflict resolution, respect for human rights, peaceful living together among different people and cultures, a society without xenophobia, racism and any other kind of violence towards human beings and their environment.



View at the Historical Park of Monte Sole,  
SO-CLOSE Project Archive

Monte Sole is a triangle of hills, approximately 10 miles south of Bologna, between the valley of the river Setta and the River Reno. The silence and the peacefulness of this seemingly untouched place are the result of terrible violence. Between the middle and the end of September 1944, the command of the 16th armoured grenadier division of the SS decided on a military operation for the „destruction of the partisan groups and the cleansing of the adversarial territory”. This operation, consigned to the command of Major Walter Reder, took place between September 29th and October 5th 1944.

The entire area was surrounded by about 1,000 soldiers, among them members of the Italian Republican National Guard. Divided into four platoons, they combed through the entire area from the north, south, east and west. They burned the houses and killed the animals as well as the people. The results after seven days of the massacre were 770 victims, of whom 216 were children, 142 over 60 years old and 316 women. The massacre happened in 115 different places:



villages, houses, and churches. The massacre of Monte Sole is the biggest Nazi massacre of civilians in Western Europe during WWII. It was not a reprisal but combing through military operations meant to end in a massacre. Survivors were forced to leave the area and try to rebuild a life elsewhere, bringing with them only pain, trauma and a feeble hope for the future.

In almost 20 years, we witnessed many different types of people encountering Monte Sole history and painful memories and we can say that the strength of Monte Sole reached every one of them because everyone could find an echo of Monte Sole in their everyday life. This is particularly true when considering people who are living with similar traumas today, fleeing from wars, dictatorships, massacres, racism and discrimination. It felt almost natural, then, to join the So Close project, thinking that its participatory methodology could have helped even more this connection. Moreover, So Close was offering a platform of activities and tools that could have empowered the sharing of personal life stories beyond stereotypes and prejudices, beyond the usual rhetoric of mutual understanding among different cultures, promoting real social cohesion.

Every activity we offer starts with the group's presence in some of the places of the massacre, which activates cognitive and emotional processes that make the educational activity an all-around human experience. The idea of a path, of a journey, is something, then profoundly linked to the deep meaning of memory of the present and of the future elaborated by the Peace School. This is why the very first tool designed by the So-Close project to be chosen was the interactive STORY-MAP, where geography is the main narrative thread linking the routes of forced displacement to create a dialogue between the memories of local communities and the current experiences of exiles, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Both survivors of the Monte Sole massacres and refugees wanted to represent their story by avoiding the perspective of victimhood while giving back a complex image, giving dignity and contextualising what happened through the rights that every human being has. The idea was to change the fact that there are too many such stories out in the public discourse and very often they emphasise the element of pain and struggle, only the negative experience; the need was to show both the resilience and strength of the refugee and his/her skill and experience. The work of the Peace School experts was to coordinate the material collection, and to act as the full agency of what to tell and how to tell the story of the protagonists. That's why the presented stories are so different from the others.



Testing SO-CLOSE Tools during the Open Day at Monte Sole, SO-CLOSE Project Archive

The choice for the second tool to use was the result of the long and multilayered participative process the So Close designed for the first part of the project. Through interviews, focus groups and workshops, the harsh past of the Italian fascist dictatorship WWII and its tragedies were shared and put in the context of the situation of the newcomers who chose to participate in the project. Some of them directly experienced the violence of war, some others suffered from prosecution and discrimination, and some have in their memories the link to a European colonial past that is deploying the consequences till today, both in the home country and in the family and personal memories. It was quite clear for anyone participating that those discussions were pivoting around some key words and concepts and that those words and concepts needed to be shared around if the goal was to reinforce and promote social cohesion. Among the tools, there was the perfect way for this sharing: the participatory VIRTUAL EXHIBITION. The idea was to exploit each concept as a matter of inspiration and – as curators do – to aggregate different pieces (pictures, music, paintings, videos) capable of representing the initial idea of the creators' group and stimulating new perspectives, connections and ideas in the users.



M.C. Escher - Relativity.  
Lithograph 27,7x29,3 cm. July 1953,  
[www.mcescher.com](http://www.mcescher.com)

What was most valuable in working with these tools was that they proved themselves to be, at the same time, relatively simple to use/build and versatile, clear but not boring, and not only interactive but also enriched by the users. Just to make a couple of examples, we would like to mention a couple of features that we found to be very useful and, at the same time, very effective in terms of the public interest. The first features relate to the Story Map: the functions “side2side” and “juxtapose”. Similar to the idea of showcasing two images side by side, they differ by the possibility of showing two different but related elements or time changes in the same

subject. These visual features are of immediate comprehension, catch curiosity, keep the user interested in the story and – above all – are the plastic representation of the core concept of connections among life stories far in time and/or space.

In terms of the virtual exhibition, the most valuable feature is the button “contribute to the exhibition”. It is undeniable that we live in a very fast and tightly-knit society. Even if we find something that interests us, the amount of time and energy we are capable of devoting to it is usually limited. We promise ourselves to go back and dedicate care and attention, but most of the time, this is not going to happen. Having such a button at the



end of every exhibition not only spreads and strengthens a lot the fundamental So Close pillars of co-creation and participation, but it also reduces the gap between an abstract interest and will to participate and the chance to put that in action.

Both the theoretical premises and the practice related to the use of tools show perfectly the value for our everyday work and for future exploitation. To have a Peace School in Monte Sole means trying to decontaminate the place, going beyond the mere conservation of memory. The Peace School is not, and cannot be, a place where certain people disseminate the “right values” to the unaware or unenlightened. It is not and cannot be an institution that uses heritage to speak for itself, believing that this alone would manifest a specific benevolent inner and innate power for good. The Peace School is – and aims to be more and more – a place separated from the frenzy of everyday life, a place in which different people meet to study, to experience the complexity of and the unanswerable questions about human beings, to share the beauty and the difficulty of intellectual and emotional research that does not accept a hierarchy of ideas but affirms a multiplicity of free contributions. For these reasons, rather than promoting a top-down approach, the Peace School opts for an effective peacebuilding methodology that relies on a community-based strategy. The two web tools we choose fit perfectly in this vision, strategy and way of work. We use them with groups of citizens (students and adults) coming to Monte Sole to let them experience the connection between past and present; we use them with groups of newcomers in order to offer an effective way of expression.

For the Peace School, to educate through a place of memory means to bring to light the ‘continuum of violence that exists in all human beings. Rather than an isolated aberration, violence has its specific premises and development processes, starting from nothing and growing in intensity and scale. For the Peace School, education through a place of memory is based on creating an opportunity to make every individual conscious of their own possibility of choice. At the Peace School, we strongly believe that all this is not confined to the link to a place of memory, but the same approach could be replicated when facing a different kind of heritage: from art to traditions, from literature to rituals, every institution dealing with possible encounters of different perspectives and points of view can benefit of the So Close theoretical framework and practices. Co-creation and participative workshops on one side, easy to build and easy to use web-tools on the other side, are a potent combination for enhancing social cohesion. That should be the mission of every current cultural institution.



# A

## "I can call myself lucky"– Moussa Molla Salih, contributor to Monte Sole's storymap and virtual exhibition

I am Moussa Molla Salih. I was born and grew up until I was fifteen in northern Benin, in a city called Djougou, the capital of the Donga region. I am a 24-year-old boy who arrived on Italian soil at the age of 16. As an applicant for international protection, I was fortunate to be placed in various reception centres where I followed my path as an immigrant. From the reception centre in Via Mattei to the reception centre for minors in the Pilastro district to the high autonomy flat. Later, I lived in Antonella and Fabrizio's house, in Piazza San Giovanni in Monte, in the city centre. They are people I will never stop thanking.



I can call myself lucky for various reasons, starting with the fact that I happened to be in Bologna, a splendid and welcoming city that I love with all my heart.

I was lucky because not everyone had the same path as me, primarily because of the constant changes the migrant reception system has had and is having every year.

I wouldn't know how to talk about the background of my migrant journey without mentioning and at least thanking many workers I met during my reception phase in general, but in particular, one indefatigable person: Anna Viola Toller.

### **What kind of art do you create?**

It is important for me to say that when I arrived in Italy, precisely here in Bologna, on

21/01/2015, and after being transferred to that facility for minors in February, I immediately started theatre in March with the Cantieri Meticci company, from which I benefited enormously. Thanks to this meeting, many things happened, such as touring almost all the regions of Italy and then touring some European countries.

For Cantieri Meticci, every corner of a city was just right for doing a theatre workshop or shows and so I had a lot of fun.

We won an award in 2017 at Santarcangelo di Romagna Theater Festival with the show Shebab: unforgettable moments. With a group of only eleven people, it was really fun to discover those theatres, not to mention the different welcomes we had in different places and the laughs and discussions we had



together. Since then, my art, the art I create, has been acting and dancing.

### **Where do you find your inspiration?**

Honestly, inspiration comes to me from talking to people, immigrant or not, or from seeing people dance or hearing music that contains some Afro rhythms.

### **Did your migration background influence or change your art? How?**

I can definitely say that my migrant background has influenced but, above all fuelled my art. I remember once when I interviewed migrants during an Easter holiday in Treviso, it was a trip I made with Fabrizio. On that trip, an acquaintance of his took us to a kind of meeting place for young people who had been kicked out of reception centres and they did carpentry workshops there; the place was called Django. Or very often, when I was interviewing guests, when I was working as an operator in the reception centres for minors, my migrant background helped me gain confidence and understanding, the possibility of sharing. I strongly feel that my migrant background has influenced my art because it has given me the opportunity to build friendships with different communities of different countries here in the area.

### **What differences are there being an artist in your homeland and the country you currently live?**

I have always cultivated my art, even before migrating. For example, I had created a small group both in the neighbourhood and at

school and this allowed us to feel part of a community. Together we did activities such as traditional and modern dance, practised a traditional fight called bembère (we did it when the moon was full) and prepared small plays at school. I personally was more into dancing than acting; at least, that's what my paternal grandmother said. But at the same time, we had to face several obstacles. For example, my father never agreed, and not only mine but also the parents of many others of us. We were even prohibited from playing football. This was especially the case in very religious families. To tell the truth, we had a very troubled childhood, and this meant that we did not even think about possible opportunities but were just busy facing or getting around obstacles.

Once I arrived in Italy, I understood the meaning of the word opportunity and of all the others that lead you to growth.

### **What does art mean to you?**

In my view, art means to express yourself, communicate and then also be able to listen to the Other.

### **Does your art have a message? If so, which?**

I use all these arts, all the languages I am capable of, to pass messages of openness, welcome and solidarity, for example, at events. As they say in a saying in my country, at the end of the day, politics is the art of being able to speak. But perhaps that is for the few... there are many other arts that we all know: dancing, singing, drawing.



### **Has there been a specific time that you recall not having your voice heard?**

I would call myself voiceless in my first years here in Italy due to not knowing the language, of course. Later, thanks to theatre, school and other family acquaintances, I was able to assimilate quickly, and I found my voice loud and clear.

### **Do you have a network of other artists you rely on - and what do you do to support each other?**

I have done my best to maintain networks of knowledge of all kinds, and certainly also artistic ones, because it's a whole different thing with them. This bond is very fruitful because we help each other by making videos and tackling different awareness-raising topics together, or, when we can recreate the occasion, by doing performances.

### **What do you want to achieve with your art?**

In the near future, I would like to make a big positive impact in the world of cinema. This is almost a dream for me and for each of us, which is to promote our art to the point where we can make a living out of it and to erase that saying - in Italy, you cannot live solely on art - which makes me sick and infuriates me.

### **What's your biggest barrier to being an artist? How do you address it?**

There are so many hurdles we face, like finding a willing person to interview for a certain project, or having to be extras in videos when

you are short-staffed, or even finding people willing to testify in schools as protagonists of their immigration life. is almost always an unsolvable equation. To deal with these small and big problems, one of the first things we try to organise is a small reimbursement of expenses for those people who are often in great financial difficulty. But above all, I rely on the strength of the group: the community I work with is powerful in that it challenges almost all existing barriers and prejudices. In fact, this is our strength and is the main reason why I work with them and I will always do so with any group/community that shares these same ideas.

### **Why did you decide to cooperate with the SO CLOSE Project?**

I decided to collaborate with So Close because after taking part in a meeting/workshop with the School of Peace, I liked the environment, the ways of doing things, how they approach people and especially the struggles against racial and gender discrimination. In short, a mountain of things that I already challenged in my small life as an activist, so I did not hesitate to accept the collaboration and I am happily proud of it.

### **What is your contribution to the SO CLOSE Project?**

I was one of the interviewees during the initial part of the project (WP1) and I took part in the focus groups phase (WP2). Finally, I started to serve and actively work in the WP4, feeding and implementing the tools, organising and participating in the open day event.



## **Did the project give you any new opportunities? If so, which?**

I can say that the So Close project gave me several opportunities, among which I want to emphasise that of moving from the position of the interview subject to the person interviewing people. I finally felt I could be another person from the victim or the “different person” to be interviewed. I was also able to put into action my passion for taking pictures of meaningful places and people. Not forgetting that crazy desire to help others and especially to feel useful in innovative group work, to have the chance to make new acquaintances and more. There is also the discovery factor of the war sites in Marzabotto and stories like that of Cornelia (Paselli, one of the survivors of the massacre; NoT). Finding connections between the immigration history of the past and the present was a crazy thing for me.

## **Do you think the experience with SO CLOSE will anyhow influence your art?**

For me, collaborating with the SO-CLOSE has boosted my personal growth. It allowed me to hear stories of places and people I did not know. The collaboration was very significant to me and influenced my art a lot.

## **What did you learn from the cooperation?**

Working with the So Close Project has given me so much personal growth, allowing me to hear stories of places and people I did not know. This is a very significant step for me and I would say it has changed my art a lot because

it has changed the way I relate to others around me. Consequently, it will change anyone who puts themselves out there like I do.



Moussa at the Open Day Monte Sole with other contributors to the SO-CLOSE Project,  
SO-CLOSE Project Archive

## **Do you use new technologies in your artistic practice? Why?**

In my opinion, the relationship between art and new technologies is problematic because technology calls into question the authenticity, originality and, therefore, the credibility of works and puts a distance between the works themselves and the viewer. However, I am well aware that for some people, new technologies are a language to bring art closer because it makes it more familiar, more similar to what we use every day. I guess it depends on the point of view. Personally, I don't think my art can benefit from new technologies, but I am doubtful because it is true that I believe it is important to maintain originality and everything else, but it is also true that with new technologies, you go further, touching so many worlds that would be unreachable without technology.



**Are you trying to support local communities and integration practices through your art? If so, how?**

For the building of a cohesive and supportive community, contemporary artists can play an essential role, especially for those who always have to work, because they can make the community more active and present for everyone through their arts. For example, I try to support local communities with my art combined with my work. I try to take people out to get to know first of all the city where they live, introduce them to some of the gastronomic and museum culture, and introduce them to the emblematic places of the host city. Create intercultural events to enable them to make new acquaintances.

**Do you think that contemporary art and artists, especially those with experience of forced emigration, have the potential to address social issues such as, for example, exclusion and other forms of inequality in an innovative way? Can they be catalysts for social innovation? Please explain your point of view.**

Unfortunately, in my opinion, few contemporary artists, especially those who have had forced immigration, will be willing to deal with issues of exclusion and discrimination. Not least because some of these artists have a very heavy past and in my opinion, it does no one any good to dwell on the past. I say this as a “protagonist”. It has not been at all easy for me to play myself during performances or, even worse in schools, but I have always

made it thanks to my sole purpose to refute as far as I could certain horrible narratives in the press and mass media. At the same time, however, I also recognise that in this process, it can be helpful for some contemporary artists to adopt new technologies to strengthen their skills or to find a method to make their voices heard and give their bodies space.

# To talk about the past and understand the present – The Exile Memorial Museum Consortium's storymap and virtual exhibition



The Exile Memorial Museum (MUME) is dedicated to the research and dissemination of the 1939 republican exile experience across the French border. Among our aims are to promote the study of exile as a historical constant, as well as to establish points of encounter with other historical and current phenomena, such as migrations, exodes, other forced population displacements and the persecution of people because of their ideas in defence of freedom, democracy and social progress. We talk about historical cases to talk about current events, and So Close is about this, about visiting the past to link it to the present. Adding the experiences of recent refugees to those of the exiles of 1939 will be a key element in developing new narratives. In this way, these new narratives will link the past and the present in a deeper way.

In So Close, MUME has put itself at the service of the participants to collect ideas, proposals and narratives that have been taking shape during the first two years of So Close. All this information has been materialised in two projects, one dealing with the complexity of exiles and the other offering some educational resources to work on the prejudices and stereotypes that exist around forced migrations. The tools chosen were the storymap for the first project and the webdoc for the second.



Focus Group, November 2020,  
SO-CLOSE Project Archive



The storymap allows to graphically capture the non-linearity of the routes, represent stories geographically, as well as to locate places of interest for the users of the tool. In our case, each itinerary shows a moment of the route from a different point of view each time:

👉 The first itinerary focuses, above all, on the beginning of the journey: on the emotions, the decisions, the comings and goings. This is done from the point of view of the individual, specifically, of an artist exiled for the Spanish civil war and of an artist exiled nowadays. Artists and their relatives have provided us with the content and images to complete their routes.



A glimpse of MUME's Storymap SO-CLOSE Project Archive

👉 The second itinerary shows the view of the group -if we can call it that way- of people who have gone through this experience. This map deals with the route itself and the elements involved in it (causes, transports, borders, refugee camps, solidarity). In order to gather contents, we made a route through symbolic places of the republican exile with people who have had to leave their country of origin in the present time. In each place, the voice of witnesses of the past was brought to generate a dialogue between the current and the historical experiences.



Past and present dialogue route, SO-CLOSE Project Archive

👉 Finally, the third map focuses on the challenges once the destination has been reached. This map is intended to appeal to the solidarity and commitment of the community. The storymap provides a sample of each of the major themes that participants indicated were important to them when they arrived. In addition, there is a link to a form that can be used



Workshop with social integration students and refugees, SO-CLOSE Project Archive

to complete a collaborative map of useful resources at the destination, thus engaging the community.

Of the three tools, the webdoc is the one that offers the most flexibility to include other types of stories and resources. This was the main reason for choosing it, since this project was created by many different agents and there was a great variety of content.

The design of the educational webdoc has involved refugees and migrants, NGOs, teachers and students of social integration, as well as the educational service of the MUME and the MUME staff dedicated to So Close. With this team, the lines of the project have been woven into the content and adjusted it.

Being part of the So Close network can be useful for those cultural institutions that, like MUME, are dedicated to disseminating narratives on forced migration and exile and intend to do so attractively in an online format. The So Close tools allow to display audiovisual and 360 content in a simple and suggestive way.



# B

**"My weapon is drawing and painting"**  
– Javier Zamora, contributor to MUME's tools

I am Javier Zamora; I was born in Havana in 1980. I studied electricity for four years, but I realised that my other vocation, plastic artist, was developing. Then I struggled to train in this and the year I graduated, I left for El Salvador. I went with a great illusion, but there I discovered a difficult society for artists. For a lot of reasons, we decided to leave, I had to do it first because being Cuban, in terms of visas and immigration procedures, is a curse. So later I reunited here with my family.



#### **What kind of art do you create?**

I create visual art. My strong weapons are drawing and painting; right now, as a painter, I'm out of the trade, but I consider myself a painter. As a speciality, I studied engraving. I am interested in sculpture; in fact, the first time I came here was to make a sculpture, a challenge because I am not a sculptor. I am interested above all in the limits between techniques, between the arts in general. I'm interested in working on those lines, on those frontiers that can exist between an abstract drawing and a figurative drawing, between the technique of engraving and sculpture. That's why my graduation thesis was precisely to build three-dimensional objects from

two-dimensional objects. For a long time, I have been interested in breaking frontiers, blurring frontiers, and erasing those imaginary lines that do not really exist; they are an invention.

#### **Where do you find your inspiration?**

I find inspiration in many things, not in something specific. I find it in a problem, in

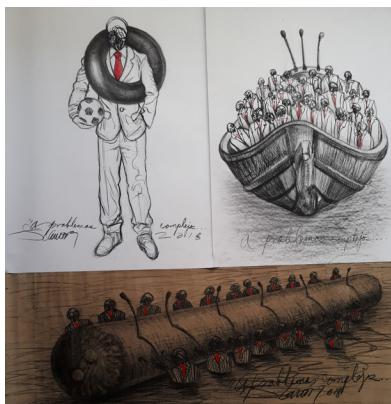
a sentence, in a text, in an image, in something I heard. The situations I experience affect me a lot; there are many things in my way of thinking that are influenced by the outside (vegetation, fauna, a bus, the beach or the television, a procedure I went to do, the police who stop you and ask you for



"Canoes" by Javier Zamora,  
artist's private archive



your documents... life). I am also interested in freeing myself for a moment from the responsibility, even at a technical level, that the drawing has to be “well done”. I am also very inspired by the inner self, a way into oneself. I practice a gesture that comes out and I don’t want to stop it, it’s always the same and it’s always different. It always seems to be the same gesture, but sometimes it suggests things that are identifiable, like a head, or a skull for all the deaths in El Salvador. And right now, as I am outside those harsh realities, but I have others, that gesture has taken on a slightly more erotic connotation. With it, I separate myself a little from reality and I have a lot of fun.



Series “To complex problems” by Javier Zamora,  
artist's private archive

### **Did your migration background influence or change your art? How?**

I didn’t become deeply aware of this until I discovered myself in the middle of a migration. I was not aware of it, but art has always served me as an escape. Art is a way of living.

Whoever dances, dances all the time, even when sitting in an office. It can’t be stopped. Poverty doesn’t stop it, nor does having to do 20 jobs or whatever. I have become aware of this; it is something that cannot be stopped. You can be in construction, but your way of seeing the world, your sensibility, will make you see concrete as a possible texture, for I don’t know what. Avoiding it creates monsters.

### **What differences are there being an artist in your homeland and the country you currently live?**

Cuba is pure art, the street, the people. Everywhere you go, there is someone who paints, draws, writes or practices some artistic expression. The obstacles in my country are mostly material, although politics and censorship weigh heavily, even for those who think they are not affected. At an academic or artistic training level, the ceiling in Cuba is very high. Anywhere, in the neighbourhood, in elementary school, in high school, not to mention in a traditional school -one of the first in Latin America- of visual arts, or in the Higher Institute of Art, to which I did not apply because I decided to leave the country. However, all this is not easy because you have to prepare yourself; they are challenging vocational schools, where many people want to enter and it is, in a way, competitive. Nevertheless, there is a very complex political situation and I believe that it is the artists who, in many cases, are changing the country. There are opportunities to study



and to train, yes, but to develop as an artist and continue climbing the ladder is another matter. Outside my country, the difficulty is also material; even to get to the intellectual level, you have to have the material. Let's add the fact, not less important, of having to start from scratch, like anyone else who decides to change country, no more, no less. I also observe that knowledge is not shared abroad; I don't know if it is because it costs money, because of status or simply because of selfishness. I think that in Cuba, what is known is shared, here, we have to save the exceptions, which fortunately exist. Still, I think I'm going to make it, or if I look closely, I've already made it, even though not many people know me and art is not my source of sustenance.

### **What does art mean to you?**

Art is a way of living, it is an escape route, so I can get away from reality or enter it more intensely. And it is much more. I can reinterpret everything, the difficulty, whatever it is, and transform it into fuel to put it into the vehicle that I am and keep going. Without that, I don't know what I would have done; I don't know what would have become of me without art.

On the other hand, the procedures for a visa are complicated for anyone, especially if you don't have enough money to take advantage of the benefits that the immigration laws grant to the chosen ones. To come here, I did it through the arts; I won a scholarship and went out,

then I won another scholarship and stayed. Art has saved me, always. On a logistical level, because of the plan we drew up as a family to be able to come, but also on an inner level, on a mental, spiritual and emotional level, it has saved me from the madness of being so sane. Because all these journeys, all these situations that so many people have in life, destroy you emotionally and mentally, they take your self-esteem and tear it into pieces, especially being in a world where money rules. If you recover from this, then you become very strong on an emotional level and art is key.

I have a theory that if all artists from all disciplines, from all over the entire planet, one day say: no more of this for a year. You're going to see suicide in full; you're going to see sickness in full, we're going to see the full madness that we really live in. So let's pay attention to this; let's give these people a chance. Many of them have had to do whatever it takes to be able to keep their art. Actually, to be able to stay alive.

### **Does your art have a message?**

#### **If so, which?**

You tell me, I believe that my art can serve so that what it is established can be reviewed again. Look at it again, don't take it for granted. Sometimes my art also has the absolute intentionality of, on a given subject, protesting. Maybe my work is a call to "Be careful what you believe in", it can be



dangerous. Especially if we never ask ourselves why we believe it.

**Do you have a network of other artists you rely on - and what do you do to support each other?**

No. If support can be understood as debating, confronting and self-criticising and trying to move forward, there has always been at least one person with whom we could go into that depth to talk about his art and mine. And to stimulate and encourage each other. But there have always been a small number of people. There may be 3 or 4 isolated people, people I have contact with who are also creators and, somehow, when we have time, we try to support each other in a moral sense. But a network as such, no.

**What do you want to achieve with your art?**

I would like to focus on these limits, on certain rigid visions coming from one side or the other. I always do it with a feeling of insufficiency because I'm not convinced that one more person pointing the finger would do any good.

I'm interested in making rigidity more flexible. It is not enough for me to criticise. Obviously, I can't always propose, because sometimes I don't know what to propose and I don't think it's my job. I consider that calling attention to something established is important. I have to confess that I am tired of seeing that so many people make that call even better and louder than

me, and nothing happens and apparently nothing changes. That has me in a contradiction because apathies are gaining ground, but, on the other hand, there is a little voice that says that if some things have been able to be changed, it has been because of that, because people have not gotten tired and have continued, they have killed them, they have burned them and they have continued. Who am I to say no? It is the only thing we know; the only way humanity has known to change something for the common good. Power, whenever it can, blocks everything. It only gives up when it is left with no way out and it is in real danger. I live in this contradiction of exhaustion and of life (in society) that is a little rotten, but I find beauty, which is everywhere, even if the outside makes a lot of noise. I can't and won't give up. I have seen people struggling in worse conditions than me, and these are the people who inspire me.

**What's your biggest barrier to being an artist? How do you address it?**

To be an artist, the biggest barrier is oneself, although it is not the only one. The absorption of time and energy to get a paid job or, finally, some kind of economic stability is a background noise that is always there. That crushing, terrible, enslaving machinery in which if you stop, you are left behind. Always behind that carrot. That's where art plays a vital role; that's why I think that creative force never disappears; whether it's



repressed or not, it's something you carry inside. We are humans.



Twelve pieces of paper from the series "I just know it's me" by Javier Zamora, artist's private archive

### **When do you talk about your art?**

On some occasions, with some of these people I interact with, we talk about projects, we dream, we complain... whatever it takes. Mostly in private circles, not in open forums. I actually consider that I have more questions than answers. It is difficult to accept that having more doubts than certainties is good, not bad. So much certainty is much more dangerous, I believe. You have to have a guide, something that calls you, but that something is always improvable. The problem is when we are convinced that, as we profess this particular belief (ism, religion, culture, flag, homeland), this is the good thing. There is nothing that can be improved and, obviously, we must dedicate ourselves to destroying the antagonist (the evil). We have to attack the way of understanding the world that is different from ours, we have to

win in a debate, we have to be right, it has to be our idea that prevails because God, or the law, or the State... are with us. I can't stand that kind of attitude, it's mostly what I try to protect myself from, because we have been educated in this and obviously, I also fall into the trap. I would like that my art could serve to improve that. So that this, at least, is observed once again.

### **Why did you decide to cooperate with the SO CLOSE Project?**

I decided to collaborate because So Close's goals resonated strongly with me. Thinking that I am one more, with many more privileges than many people I have seen on the road, but not for that reason less hurt. Or maybe yes, less hurt, but not for that reason insensitive to the migratory phenomenon. On the contrary, I am becoming more and more aware of the situation and So Close appears, with the intention of changing stereotypes, of influencing a little. More than anything else because of its bases, its objectives. At one point, when I understood what the project was about, I had doubts about whether my story, which has had a million privileges, could be useful or not. I doubted it until you made me see that this could be a contribution as well.

### **What is your contribution to the SO CLOSE Project?**

A great willingness to be there for whatever was needed and whatever was required of me. Although at an academic level, at a concept level, at a usefulness level for others... time



will tell. For me, yes, the mere fact of being with others, of hearing the stories in the first person, is enriching. It's like getting into what you have to get into. Something that touches you from the inside and you have the opportunity to be there with the people who have lived it. That is enriching and I'm sure it feeds my work, I'm sure it feeds my life. I speak from So Close for me, but from me to there... at a conceptual or deeper level, you can tell me.

/ Javier has opened his life and his work for So Close, it is all displayed on a map. He has participated in meetings with other people who have lived through forced migrations and with students to design activities for the Webdoc. He has energised spaces of artistic creation, contributing with his knowledge. /

These are facts, but I wonder how this can contribute to the outside world? It comes to my mind that it can give a little bit of hope to other people who have an artistic vocation and the need to move. I know that there are not many people who believe that they can undertake an artistic career because society itself tells them from an early age: "you are not good for that, you are not good for being an artist, you are going to starve to death, you have to be an engineer, a lawyer, a doctor..."?.. Or any other career with which they can make a living. In other words: Money. But it can be useful to someone who does believe it and sees that, if this one has achieved it, I can also achieve it and when they see those little figures of the heads, they say,

"I draw better than this guy" and they take the plunge.

### **Did the project give you some new opportunities? If so, which?**

It has given me the opportunity to enrich myself, to meet new people, new stories, to become more familiar with the subject, to see more clear my own history, where I come from and where I want to go. It has taught me what a shelter is, it helped me to understand that a refugee is not only a person who is put in a tent in a desert or on a beach, that a shelter implies more than that. It also showed me that there are more people who are aware. That I am not the only crazy one who sees that bureaucracy is crazy, that there are many more people, even locals, who perceive that there is a horrible thing, a malicious hand, behind many migratory processes. I call it a hand to call it something. Sometimes I doubted if I was the only one who perceived this, because maybe I read three or four books and I come from a place where, paradoxically, I was encouraged to investigate and not to trust everything. Am I the one who sees things this way and the others don't? No. Here I learned that I am not alone in this vision of things. It has given me a lot on a human level.

### **What was the most interesting part of the cooperation?**

The cooperation itself.

### **Do you think the experience with SO CLOSE will anyhow influence your art?**



Sure. I couldn't tell you how. So Close makes me be more intelligent about these issues because I think it's necessary not to let our guard down. It's going to influence the way I create, no doubt.

### **What did you learn from the cooperation?**

Humanity and empathy. I have seen a little more clearly to what extent the opposite exists: Racism, hatred and all these things that are there, some of them authorised. They are in the institutions; they are in the street, they are in the restaurant. Bureaucracy kills; it's as simple as that.

### **What opportunities does the project give to artists like you?**

Relational opportunities with all that this may entail.

### **What is your opinion on the relationship between art and new technologies?**

It is a favourable opinion. I believe that art and new technologies can go very far in interacting together. Taking advantage of those resources to go further, to be more effective, to open the mind to other visions, to other ways of seeing things. The future is technological. Either it is technological or we go back to the caves. I see humanity this way, although I always hope to be ready to modify my vision of things and of the world in general. We are on the verge of becoming aware of the importance and wonder that is

the Internet. Or if we don't value this and don't know how to handle it we are lost.

### **Do you use new technologies in your artistic practice?**

No, I operate in the traditional way, but I'm working on implementing technology right now. I use Instagram and Facebook, but if you look at it you'll see that I haven't posted in a long time. Maybe I don't know how to manage it very well, or I don't find the time or strength to do it every day. There is hardly any time. And I live with the pressure of "I have to have more strength, go to sleep later, get up earlier".

### **What role can contemporary artists play in building stronger local communities?**

A vital role. With less egomaniacal, more honest collaborations. Real collaborations.

### **Are you trying to support local communities and integration practices by your art? If so, how?**

Sometimes yes, in some projects for sure, in general, no. I don't consider that I have a developed work of my own, but every time I have the opportunity to do a mural in a town, to interact with the people - or whatever I can - and there is a community involved, of course, I do it, but not expressly. I would like to.

### **Do you think that contemporary art and artists, especially those with**



experience of forced emigration, have the potential to address social issues such as, for example, exclusion and other forms of inequality in an innovative way? Can they be catalysts for social innovation? Please explain your point of view.

Sure, and they also have enough moral authority and experience to, at least, describe the phenomenon in the first person, which is shocking and nourishing. Now at a creative level, I think that when a person has specific capacities, has specific training and has lived through certain things, they will surely have new visions, different visions, and crazy things for sure. You have to listen to them; they can contribute a lot.

**Would you like to add something?**

Thank you for everything.



# The Villa Decius Association's virtual exhibition

Łucja Piekarska



Villa Decius (VDA) is a cultural institution operating in a renaissance villa in Cracow. We joined SO CLOSE mainly for the interest in developing a multicultural, inclusive community where heritage can act as an important part of social integration. As the project coincided with the war in Ukraine and provided it with new needs/motivations.

## About the virtual exhibition

The virtual exhibition allows to gather and present a collection of digitised objects. It is simple and user-friendly both for curators and end-users, so it effectively allows to attract both content providers and audiences. The virtual exhibition is a way of gathering various data which may be commented on in a short or in a long way, but most of all, it permits connecting various objects and images in such a way as creating a real interpretive network of individual and collective stories.

In VD, we can use it to create hybrid exhibitions, which can include very different types of objects. These collections gain audiences which can also contribute to the collections and the value of feedback is very high for us.



Villa Decius building during VDA Open Day  
Krakow 2022, SO-CLOSE Project Archive



**“ I love the overall simplicity of the virtual exhibition, but I do appreciate the feedback tool, as it encourages the feedback of anyone interested (even for a minute). ”**



Lucja Piekarska presenting the VDA virtual exhibition, Krakow 2022,  
SO-CLOSE Project Archive

## Content gathering

A historian with experience in archive-based research was employed to gather the stories. It turned out, however, that the narrative created by her was not very interesting as it only dealt with some facts and provided some references to the own experiences of the refugees. The results had to be enriched by the photos, so we searched in family archives as well as in museums we had contacted. The challenge was to transform very informative results of the archive-based research into more reader-friendly, human-based stories. We also searched in very close proximity of family members.



“Transit” from the exhibition “Unpromised Land - where the past is present in the space”,  
SO-CLOSE Project Archive

I collected photos of my own, but before, I asked all friends, relatives and anyone who could have any input to the topic. I also used the snowball tool asking people to recommend others who might be willing to contribute. I used my own photos prepared for the topic we decided to share with the audience. Originally, I prepared a collection of some photos related to post-war refugees, but we decided to keep them for later, as they were too sensitive for the current war situation.

## Opportunities for stakeholders

The virtual exhibition creates opportunities for the creation of various collections which may be very easily combined/curated/exhibited. It is perfect for small privately owned collections, but it also presents tremendous potential in terms of connecting the content with artists who can interpret it in many ways (for example, by composing music based on stories).

We gain new audiences but most of all, can easily enrich the community of contributors to the exhibitions. The tool can be easily connected with other VD activities and as such, make us gain greater visibility as an institution, but most of all will add up to the processes of building a more inclusive society.



# C „To express immersiveness and inclusiveness of heritage” – Łucja Piekarska, PhD, creator of the VDA virtual exhibition

My name is Łucja Piekarska. I live in Cracow, Poland, where I was born 47 years ago. I am a social anthropologist and currently work at the university researching issues connected with identity, social memory and heritage. Before joining the university, I had extensively worked with museums as a curator, author and heritage interpreter.



## **What kind of art do you create?**

My main discipline, social anthropology, is often classified as belonging to „arts and humanities” which is a domain of reflexivity with a strong focus on understanding complex relations between people. For many anthropologists, personal experience and some self-insight remain important sources of knowledge and I am no different in this case. I write essays and articles where I elaborate on ideas. Interpretive approach and interconnectedness are probably my main characteristics when writing. I am very much interested in big ideas and how they relate to everyday experiences. In this sense, I always work on the process of representation. Sometimes it is best to write to convey these thoughts, while in other cases, creating interpretive contexts in museums or public spaces works better. This time I used digital photography to reflect on the nature of space, which is marked

by complex migration processes, mainly because I wanted to express the immersiveness and inclusiveness of heritage, which I consider to be far from highly canonised artwork.

## **Where do you find your inspiration?**

I am happy to have work which bases on constant inspiration and flow, so my research always brings me things I am very curious about. I always work with various stories, objects and images which I come across on virtually every step of my everyday journeys. My own family also equips me with fascinating (sometimes difficult) memories. I am generally eager to listen to what people have to say. In terms of sources of inspiration, I appreciate specifically: rituals and religious devotion, museums and various resistant activities, but my main significant experiences are connected with everyday life.



## **Did your migration background influence or change your art? How?**

The life of all my grandparents was determined by forced migration. Realising this and the challenges they had to face made me rethink especially the notion of life stability they all wanted to achieve despite the many drawbacks post-war reality offered. I also have personal migrant experience, and especially illegal work makes me look at the question of dignity from a different perspective. I shared a story of my grandmother in „So Close” storymap. It was a powerful experience to first narrate it and then to share it with others.

## **What does art mean to you?**

For me, art is a way of conveying important messages, telling about things that matter. In this sense, anthropology, which is my first discipline, is the same. In arts, you need to choose appropriate media to convey your message. Classically art consists of an element of craft (*techne* in Greek), which means mastering the form artists use. I do believe, however, in intellectual craft, which can be observed in conceptual art. Simple, digital photography I present as an exhibition in „So close” is a way of saying, „everybody takes part in creating common space and history even without consciously contributing to it”. In this way, I want to invite others, non-artists, to have a look at fragments of the space as ready-made art pieces. The surrealism of the Western Lands of Poland is so intense that everyone can be sure to find a surprise there and I would like art to have this effect

on people: give them food for thought and inspiration.

## **Does your art have a message?**

### **If so, which?**

Things that matter are part of our everyday experiences, even without being noticed. Lifestories can and should be told so that everyone can have their voice heard but we do not need to strive for a universal version of the past. The sense of belonging is very much connected with own creativity and imagination rather than some allegedly objective heritage.

## **Has there been a specific time that you recall not having your voice heard?**

I think that women’s voices are often left aside without being heard and I do recall fighting for including them in several museums and narratives.

## **What do you want to achieve with your art?**

By encouraging people to think of objects as carrying meaning, I would like to engage them in reflection on how the purpose of our lives gets structured by ourselves and our cultures.

## **What’s your biggest barrier to being an artist? How do you address it?**

Well, I am not a professional in traditional terms as an artist, so I understand I can always be excluded from the art world as such.



### **When do you talk about your art?**

When I come to the point of extracting experiences to turn them into objects/pictures/situations.

### **Do you feel that your art community challenges existing barriers and assumptions?**

There is no clear view on who/what country can afford to have arts and artists and if they pay for them, should they have some officially formulated duties/state of mission.

### **Why did you decide to cooperate with the SO CLOSE Project?**

I was invited to join a project which matched exactly my experience and my interests. I felt I could contribute and also get inspired.



Lucja Piekarska during the Villa Decius Open Day in Cracow, SO-CLOSE Project Archive

### **What is your contribution to the SO CLOSE Project?**

I worked on the collection of personal stories towards a story map. I created a virtual exhibition consisting of photos taken in the Western Lands of Poland. I led workshops where I offered a method of taking into account the interpretation of personal objects.

### **Did the project give you some new opportunities? If so, which?**

I gained new perspectives on refugees, but most of all, I learned a lot about dissonant heritage, especially during my stay in Bologna. I had a personal chance to go through the creation of musical pieces illustrating my grandmother's life story.

### **What was the most interesting part of the cooperation?**

I had a collection of personal objects gathered for the exhibition. The objects were nicely narrated, but the war in Ukraine came. The interesting part was to totally change the concept of the exhibition as we wanted to highlight some hot and important circumstances. Another interesting part was an evolving process of cooperation with the writers, which so far did not bring much success but I believe will continue in the future.

### **Do you think the experience with SO CLOSE will influence your art in any way?**

Yes, I will work on the collections of personal objects very soon (I hope).

### **What did you learn from the cooperation?**

That project work is always based on human relations.

### **What opportunities does the project give to artists like you?**

Allows to experiment with new media.



### **What is your opinion on the relationship between art and new technologies?**

I love old fashion, online-based art of old masters. I love personal meetings with masterpieces, something that cannot be fully staged online. But I do appreciate the opportunities given by the Internet, specifically in network-based projects. I hope my exhibition will soon become a shared one.

### **Do you use new technologies in your artistic practice? Why?**

I try to combine the different media. For example, in the exhibition on urban gardening (Ethnographic Museum in Cracow), we sold pockets of seeds as tickets so that they could grow together with memories of the exhibition. We also used some tools of guerilla gardening. But all these activities were communicated via social media.

### **What role can contemporary artists play in building stronger local communities?**

Artists have an important role in bringing important yet sensitive topics to the debates. They are also expected to bring a personal perspective to their art, so in this way, opportunities for personal relations with the topics presented are effectively achieved for the audiences. Arts can give good excuses for debates and discussions and also for exploring the boundaries of, for example, freedom and good taste.

### **How can contemporary artists help to build stronger local communities?**

They may be willing to contribute to meetings related to common work on collective memory and the past.

### **Are you trying to support local communities and integration practices through your art? If so, how?**

My main point is to exchange a change vision of a unified/official past into an inclusive/democratic heritage where many voices can be heard. I engage in museum activities leading to the diversification of the discourse of collective memory. Also, I believe a number of anthropological/social science-based tools can help in more satisfactory learning about the contemporary world, so I include them in museum activities I co-organise.

### **Do you think that contemporary art and artists, especially those with experience of forced emigration, have the potential to address social issues such as, for example, exclusion and other forms of inequality in an innovative way? Can they be catalysts for social innovation? Please explain your point of view.**

Social innovation requires diversity and professionalism. I think academia should be included in such processes, but the artists' views can add much, too. I am, however, aware of the limited impact of the art on social change when we talk of small local communities which invite an artist for a residency in something beyond the necessary expenses.



# “Artistic, poetic innovation on the topic of forced migration” – the Villa Decius Storymap

## Kasia Ioffe

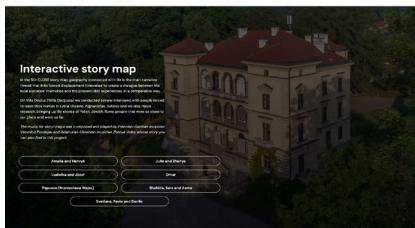


The Villa Decius Institute for Culture is a non-artistic municipal a cultural institution, whose innovative form makes it possible to continue the programs which have been carried out in this place for 25 years and to open up to Cracow and the people of Cracow in the area of promoting the protection of the city's cultural heritage. The Institute is active in areas related to Cracow's membership in such organisations as the Organisation of World Heritage Cities (OWHC), the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, the League of Polish Cities and UNESCO Sites and the National Institute of Cultural Heritage. It has the original intention of Justus Decius from Alsatia and his son Ludovicus Decius the Younger to make the Villa a venue for the exchange of thoughts between artists and philosophers all over the world and the harbour of tolerance and freedom. The team of the Villa Decius Institute for Culture gathers people with passion, professionals, and promoters of cultural heritage.

I've got to the Institute being promoted by the ex-head of PEN Club of Belarus Andrej Khadanovich to the head of Villa Decius Dominika Kasprowicz. The day I was present at the writers' meeting at Villa, we talked and discussed a couple of projects I could be involved in. The SO CLOSE project was the most artistic, about poetic innovation on the topic of forced migration. So I decided it is exactly what I'm here for, being a person forced to migrate and being a poet and a psychologist and art therapist by education and work experience.

In the SO CLOSE story map, geography connected with life is the main-narrative thread that links forced displacement itineraries to create a dialogue between the local





Homepage of the VDA Storymap,  
SO-CLOSE Project Archive

societies' memories and the present-day experiences in a comparative way.

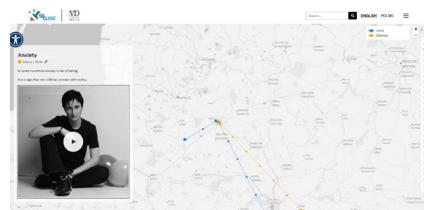
We created an archive with stories of forced migration and with art involved in it. We conducted several interviews with people who were forced to leave their homes in Libya, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Belarus, and Venezuela and we also conducted research,

bringing up life stories of Polish, Jewish, and Roma people that were so close to our place and went so far.

I wrote letters to Multicultural Centre in Cracow and invited people; I met people in the Market and at the railway station to talk to, and we met and worked with them a lot, interviewing and writing down the subtitles in 3 languages, later on, asking for and collecting their memories on photos, records, things.

Afterwards, I told these stories to musicians who wrote the music. Further, people wrote poetry dedicated to our participants. The music for the storymap was composed and played by Estonian – German musician Vsevolod Pozdejev and Belarusian-Ukrainian musician Zhenya Velko, whose stories will also be a part of the VDA storymap.

My favourite parts of the story map are the videos from home. The video with swingers and Sara Nazari with her little sister the day Taliban came, or photos of Julia with family and Omars happy-ending, or the poems and music that were created – just because it made artists feel and create so deeply.



The story of the artist Zhenya Velko, VDA Storymap,  
SO-CLOSE Project Archive

We hope to cooperate with other institutions who want to contribute and create a meaningful project with us, not only by topic but also with the impact on society. For now, the tool is growing up empathy for migrants. It can be used in discussions, it can be the tool teens or adults are using at home, getting to know the stories of migrants and then talking about them during meetings or workshops.

Special thanks to operator Bożydar Pająk, montage Mateusz Paweł Bobek and each of the participants. Also, Volha Kovalskaya helped me to write down half of the interviews collected to create the subtitles in 3 languages.



# D „It was not easy to find my niche in the Polish culture” – Kasia Ioffe, creator of the VDA storymap

Kasia Ioffe - a member of Belarusian PEN and a part of the Cracovian A. Fredro Society of Poets. She published in Belarusian, Polish and Russian. She previously worked as a clinical psychologist and art therapist in the Republic hospital. She was forced to leave the country and live in exile for political reasons in 2020.



**Please introduce yourself and give some background (name, age, profession, etc).**

My name is Kasia. I'm 27, and I live in Cracow. I write poetry but this is what happens by inspiration, spontaneously.

**What kind of art do you create?**

The kind that creates itself. I'm trying to find and free the intertwined sounds and meanings of words.

**Where do you find your inspiration?**

In everything that is around me; it is always there. In light, colours, voices on the street, people's faces and hands, on the top of the ears of cat pretending to be asleep and under the big wet tongue of the homeless dog.

**Did your immigration background influence or change your art? How?**

I moved to Cracow in 2020. My stay in Poland was coming to an end and I was desperately looking for work as my diploma and work experience were not taken into account in Poland. I was also diagnosed with cancer and had no money to pay for my flat. My friends helped me to survive, pay rent and to pay for the meds and operations. However, the Heads of Villa Decius, Educational Foundation Nausikaa and the Andersen IT company believed in me and got me a job - well, it was 3 jobs at a time. It wasn't an easy experience to find my niche in the Polish culture. Cracow is a city where I shed more tears in two years than in all my life. And that's why I'm wondering if I can ever leave the



city that supported me during the harshest suffering.

**What differences are there in terms of working as an artist in your homeland and the country you currently live? Name obstacles and opportunities.**

It is a total „Impostor syndrome”. At the same time, one can understand that it's not about being a stranger and an alien in another culture - it is all the same feeling of delicate interconnections and looking for a common language to talk about this life and its miracles with childish misunderstandings and toddlers' curiosity.

**What does art mean to you?**

Art is an act of love, more than just grace and creation - it is also reflection, concentration, conflict, and search of understanding, acceptance and relief. Art is communication; it is always about contact. With others, with higher powers and with our own self, we can underestimate, thinking we already know who we are and what we are able to. Art is the same thing as psychotherapy or a way of living. It is even life itself. If we see art as philosophy, we'll see there is no anything that is not art. It is only gradation of our efforts and sophistication in art and our ability to stay in that tiny common area of two circles: „new, making a difference, surprising” and „decipherable, relatable, possible to somehow feel and understand”.

**Has there been a specific time that you recall not having your voice heard?**

The right question is: not heard by ...? By someone specific - yes. By my mom or dad, by my husband and my friend, by people who caused me pain, by my President, by the Belarusian and Polish governments, but in different ways. Some of them are not about to hear my voice or hear me roar, you know? I'm joking a bit. Some of them do hear when the time is right. I got to the philosophy: speak whenever you want, but don't try to be heard this way by someone you want to talk through. If you want to get to anyone who is close to you, they will come to listen. But if you want to get to someone who speaks a different language, try to learn their language. And if you want to talk to someone not interested to hear you - talk only when they are ready. Talk and language are the metaphors there. I know some people need to scream, to act, when someone not heard is doing something painful and destructive to them and the ones they do love. This is not extreme; it happens all the time. Well, I have to answer what to do if you can't stop them and don't want to cause pain. I do believe that whenever my voice is not heard by people, it is heard somewhere else. And if I was heard, every second, every feeling I had will be given to the person who didn't listen or wasn't able to understand. Not because I would be looking for „revenge”, but for the reason of growing up to reach communication and empathy.



Because what we are doing here on the planet, if not growing up to feel and understand what we did not feel and understand before.

**Do you have a network of other artists you rely on - and what do you do to support each other?**

The best question ever. It is not a network. It's Family. Some of these people saved my life. Just after answering this question, I'll write some letters from Rome to composer Vsevolod Pozdejev and his beautiful, amazing wife Eva Laas in Germany because I live thanks to their effort, literally. I will also write to Andrei Khadanovich, Belarusian poet, now living in Cracow, and to Dominika Kasprowicz, both in Villa Decius, so let the letters fly there. And of course, to Milosz Biedrzycki, Robert Rybicki and Dawid Mateusz from the Cracowian Poet's Society. And to the beloved Patti Paula Path, Zbyszek Janczukowicz and their little daughter Ronia Felicja. I continue thinking about people I want to send letters to Rome; well, it's good for me to have a free day and 30 handmade cards. What are we doing? Well, the answer to what they've done to me is Everything: they were spending New Year's Eve with me; when I was supposed to be alone, they gave me money for my cancer surgery; when I was about to die from cancer and poverty on Polish streets, they saved me, and they saved a cat that I found on the border with Ukraine (and it appeared the weakest, the sickest but the most people-loving cat I've ever seen). They gave me tasks to do; they

took me to work and included me in their travels. These people, each of them, became my family. They were not blood, like my mom and me. I definitely didn't try to get closer to them. That's the most surprising thing - I had people who really owned me, and they were not there, even though they were able to help. But the strangers and the colleagues helped. The lesson is: maybe I was wrong before helping everyone and caring and trusting people that didn't do the same for me, but how could I know who was who before? And maybe it's a miracle or „the Highest Law” - if you are giving, you'll be given, maybe not in a way you expect it to be. Becoming friends and family in this world was a miracle, a surprise. And I will never forget any bit of it, at least, until my final visit is with Alzheimer.

**What do you want to achieve with your art?**

I do not achieve anything. I'm living and loving and sharing my prayer of gratitude; that's what art means to me.

**Do you feel that your art community challenges existing barriers and assumptions?**

Yep. We are not all the same. We do not use the same sounds or mental puzzles and we do not share the same view of the world and life. And each of us is trying to be heard with no violence, but because of interest and love. That means we are looking for the figures of speech, the way of being true and interesting to others at the same time. It's not about the



attention of others; it's about the miracle of connection between true souls, minds, whatever you call it - between beings.

### **Why did you decide to cooperate with the SO CLOSE Project?**

Dominika Kasprowicz told me about it the way I thought: it is what I'm all about in life. This Project is about not only about becoming closer but also about understanding we are already closer than we imagine with others. It's all about opening your eyes and looking for a way of being friends, for knowledge instead of judgment, alienation and elimination.

### **What is your contribution to the SO CLOSE Project?**

I hope you will find it out. I was creating story-maps, connecting people and telling and retelling their stories to each other, and was observing them being inspired by those stories, writing free poems and music about it. Opening our eyes wider and seeing it is good to live, to be here, whatever is happening, it's all good, we still are able to change what's making us sad and to cherish what makes us happy. Et vidit quod esset bonus, you know. So far, I'm transitioning the sparkle both ways, that's what I do here.

### **Did the Project give you some new opportunities? If so, which?**

I've met and talked in-depth to people from distant lands. Their stories became a part of my life. And I've spent many hours with my laptop to make it work. It was a motivation:

someone got interested in what I'm able and would love to do. And that way, it was about becoming a voice of many and letting them be heard.

### **What was the most interesting part of the cooperation?**

The cooperation itself. As I said: connection is a miracle. Remember Michelangelo's Creation of Adam, the two hands in the painting. Or you can imagine whatever: Tarzan and Jane touching hands in a Disney movie, Carl Sagan's and Ann Druyan's main scenes from „Contact”.



Kasia Ioffe at the VDA Open Day, Cracow 2022,  
SO-CLOSE Project Archive

### **Do you think the experience with SO CLOSE will influence your art?**

Definitely. It gave me hope.

### **What opportunities does the Project give to artists like you?**

Look up. Hope, motivation, power to live on, the purpose of waking up, the will to love, the feeling someone needs you and you need them too.



**What is your opinion on the relationship between art and new technologies?**

Well, technology itself is also art. Hey, just look: the video game is the most complicated kind of art, including scenarios, then drama, theatre, music, poetry and visual arts. And programming is finally using symbols in a way that has some physical effects. It is magic itself, the very description of it. Technology is about crafting artefacts and creating spells working for the artefacts. And all this stuff is a creation and contact with the reality we believe we are connected with.

**Do you use new technologies in your artistic practice? Why?**

When I can, when I'm smart enough to understand how to use it. I'm not against trying something I didn't use before because I'm curious like a child. That means I'm growing up by trying new ways on my own path. As an artist, as a person - I'm going on. The only restriction I have in life and in art (you know already it's the same for me) is to avoid what hurts others if it's possible to predict and keep away from it.



# E

„Everywhere is difficult to be an artist“  
– Vsevolod Pozdejev, contributor to the  
VDA storymap

Vsevolod Pozdejev - composer and pianist from Estonia, a member of the Estonian Composer's Union. He studied piano and composition at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theater. His chamber operas were performed in Switzerland, Estonia and Russia. The portrait-concerts of the composer took place in Switzerland, Germany and Estonia. He participates as a live musician in the oldest German festival of silent films, "Regensburger Stummfilmwoche", and creates the original music for the silent films. He lives in Germany, because of the better condition for the artists in this land. He works as a ballet accompanist at the Theater Magdeburg. He is married to a pianist Eva Laas. She also performs a lot of his music pieces.



#### Please introduce yourself.

My name is Vsevolod, shortly Seva. I'm 42 years old. The interrelation between sounds and words, music and poetry fascinates me. That's why I compose the music.

#### What kind of art do you create?

I try to create out of time - so that it wouldn't be possible to recognise the epoch.

#### Where do you find your inspiration?

Somehow in the atmosphere. The world outside is still my world before I still live. And what I write or improvise is just a trace of it.

#### Did your migration background influence or change your art? How?

Yes. Another climate, much dryer and warmer than Estonia. For this reason - other harmonies, other textures.

#### What differences are there being an artist in your homeland and the country you currently live?

It is everywhere difficult to be an artist. Describing of difficulties would mean: complying.



### **What does art mean to you?**

It is something about cognition of life and being in touch with something after and behind the live. Music has very intensive relationship with time, and discovers the time as a material.

### **What do you want to achieve with your art?**

I think, the art of music can be less isolated in itself, and more open to cooperation with other arts, for instance, with contemporary poetry. I'm trying to find a way for music to reflect the meanings and intonation of modern poetry, more flexible and more sensitive, than it was possible heretofore.

### **Why did you decide to cooperate with the SO CLOSE Project?**

Because of my precious friend, poet and writer Kasya Ioffe.



Vsevolod Pozdejev at piano, artist's private archive



## „Contemporary artist is an initiator...“ – Nina Dzwoki, contributor to the SO-CLOSE Project

Nina Dzwoki born in 1998 in Rybnik. Graduated in 2022 from the Faculty of Painting at the Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow. Diploma in painting under Prof. Adam Brincken and an annex in drawing under Prof. Grzegorz Bienias. Scholarship holder for the best students of the Rector of the Academy of Fine Arts in 2020/2021, finalist of the 3rd International Student Drawing Triennial in Katowice. Coordinator in the Mosaic group. Since 2019, she has been associated with Good Looking Studio as a painter of large-format murals.

In her works, she deeply analyses the relationship between space, object and model. She works in painting, drawing, monotype and mural painting. Currently live and work in Cracow, Poland.



Nina is a 24 years old painter from Poland. She usually creates paintings, monotypes, and drawings, but also paintings on the walls (murals).

Asked where she finds her inspiration, she says, “All around me, I am focused on the relationship between space, object and model”. Art means to her “beauty, craftsmanship and aesthetics”.

She comes from Silesia, where she has roots and family. This region was often an inspiration and pretext in her works, “I referred to the industrial landscape, coal mines or local traditions, folklore”.

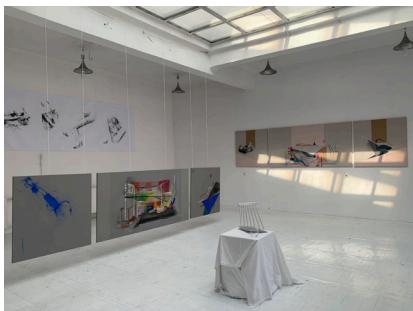
She says there are differences in being an artist in your homeland and the country you currently live: “When I went to study in Cracow from my hometown of Rybnik, new opportunities opened up for me, first and foremost the opportunity and choice of many galleries, museums, exhibitions and conversations with other esteemed artists”.

She wishes her art to be understood, “to continue to give me pleasure and allow me to make a living from art”.

She tries to convey through her paintings the beauty that comes straight from



people, from the smallest things and places, shows order and harmony, and wants the viewer to feel something when approaching her painting. Her monotypes carry affirmations, especially of the female body, showing scars, imprints, scratches and imperfections as something special.



Nina Dzwoki's thesis art pieces, artist's private archive

On a daily basis, Nina works with a group of young artists from the Mosaic Group, who exchange their experiences, cooperate and create various projects together, supporting each other.

*“ We received an invitation as a Mosaic Group to create a project and conduct workshops; the project seemed to us very interesting and innovative; it was something new for us, so we took up the challenge. (...) Thanks to the project, I met new people who wanted to share their stories with me, and I learned about new technologies such as VR. ”*

Nina, as a member of the Mosaic Group, was coordinating and conducting workshops for all participants during open days at Villa Decius and the SO CLOSE Project.

Creating together with people, talking to them and watching how everyone interprets the topic of the workshop differently was, for her, the most interesting part of the cooperation.

SO CLOSE helped her improve the capabilities needed to conduct workshops; it allowed her to invent art from scratch and show art to a wider audience - to reach people who do not work in visual art on a daily basis.

Nina says that a contemporary artist can be the initiator, the originator of a project, or an activity.“ Through activities, social actions, art can engage, unite and get to know people living close to each other every day”. She herself supports local communities and integration practices through conducting public workshops. “I try to show people from the local community that art is not to be feared, and everyone can face it on the basis of fun, experience”, she says.



SO-CLOSE project workshop with MOSAIC Group, Villa Decius 2022, SO-CLOSE Project Archive



Asked if contemporary art and artists, especially those with experience of forced emigration, have the potential to address social issues such as, for example, exclusion and other forms of inequality in an innovative way, she answers that certainly, on some issues, it is easier for them to relate to some topics, “but it seems to me that every artist, every person has some life experiences, exclusions, inequalities that can shape him and that he can in different ways convey to others better or worse”.



Nina Dzwoki in art room, artist's private archive

## „Krakow opened me to the art world” – Natalia Koktysz, contributor to the SO-CLOSE Project

Natalia Koktysz was born in 2002 in Tarnobrzeg and since 2019, has lived in Krakow. A second-year student of the Pedagogical University of Cracow at Digital Design. She works as a front-end developer at PLEO Interactive, where she develops the programming and design of applications. At the same time, she develops a passion for illustration and animation at the university. Since high school, Natalia has been a member of the Mosaic Group. Her other love is music; she plays the violin and sings.



Natalia is 20 and she lives in Cracow - "the city which is my true love". She is a Digital Design student also working as a front-end developer.

Her true love is character design and illustrations. "Art is the sense of my life, it's every single satisfying, inspiring and beautiful view in my daily life".

She works mostly in the digital world, but she also loves painting and drawing. She finds inspiration in her work, university and ultra-inspiring meetings with her uni friends. She divides her life between work and university; in both places she has people who inspire and support her in her creative activities.

Asked if her migration background influenced or changed her art, she answers: "I moved to Krakow when I was in high school. It wasn't an easy experience for a young girl, but I've never regretted that. Krakow changed me and opened me to art world; I changed my decision about my future and turned from future astrophysicist to artist & programmer. (...) Here in Cracow, I have a lot of opportunities to develop my passions and knowledge about the art world. I could become a member of the Mosaic Group, and I also was attending an art history course. Krakow is just made for artists. It's full of inspiration", she says.



Part of the album "My sacrum" published on the Mosaic Group website, [www.grupamosaic.pl](http://www.grupamosaic.pl)



Through her art, she wants to give people as much satisfaction, beauty, and inspiration as possible. She wants to make them smile - it's the best reward for me for all my work.



A piece of the mosaic created during the workshop with Group MOSAIC, Open Day in Villa Decius, Cracow 2022, SO-CLOSE Project Archive

Group Mosaic coordinated and conducted workshops for all participants during open days at Villa Decius and project So Close. The Mosaic Group that Natalia is a part of, received an invitation to cooperate with the SO CLOSE Project – she says it was a great opportunity for her to talk with people about important topics in an art way. “Thanks to the project, I could paint a smile on many people’s faces and share my passion”.

The cooperation with the SO CLOSE project gave her a talk opportunity with people with many different experiences.

As for an artist, it showed her how art can connect people, even if they are very different, with many hard experiences.

As an artist living and working partly in the digital world, she finds many connections between art and new technologies.

*“New technologies and art are, for me, intricately connected because of my work. I find connections between them everyday and this is what gives me happiness and inspiration at my job. (...) I’m convinced that every little application or website can be so much more satisfying and easier to understand and use if there is a spark of art in them.”*



‘Old women’s story’ is an illustration to Tadeusz Różewicz’s poem of the same title, part of an album of illustrations to Różewicz’s poems published on the Mosaic Group website, [www.grupamosaic.pl](http://www.grupamosaic.pl)



## „Art and technology are partners” – Agnieszka Hallmann, contributor to the SO-CLOSE Project

Agnieszka Hallmann was born in 1995 in Rzeszów. She graduated with a BA in painting at Jan Matejko's Fine Arts Academy in 2020, continuing education in art education. Holder of scholarship of Santander Bank for the art project in 2022. Part of the Mosaic group. In 2021 coordinator of the art project “NeoCogito” - art workshops and exhibition focused around Zbigniew Herbert's poetry.

Her art is focused on everything around her people portraits and psychology, colours and light, nature and horses. Oil paintings, watercolours, monotypes and classical photography are the tools to descript the world.



### Please introduce yourself and give some background (name, age, profession, background)

Hello, my name is Agnieszka; I'm 27. I come from Poland, and I'm a young artist.

### What kind of art do you create?

I do photographs, which I use as sketches too. Most of my works are paintings and drawings.

### Where do you find your inspiration?

I find inspiration around me. Emotions, views, people, animals - the world is fascinating when you are open to it.

### Did your migration background influence or change your art? How?

Actually yes. I was born in Rzeszów, and my family has come from all over Galicia. For

a few years I lived in Paris when I was little, then in London, for now, I live in Cracow. All those places taught me a lot; I would say that London was the most impactful experience for me, as it has opened extraordinary and diverse art.

### What differences are there being an artist in your homeland and the country you currently live?

Cracow has a lot of great opportunities for young artists. Here, I bounded with the Mosaic Group; there's this kind of Bohemian vibe in the city. Many other inspiring people and places.

### What does art mean to you?

It's hard work to achieve beauty, esthetic and visual poetry of light and colour.



**Does your art have a message?****If so, which?**

I try to show the beauty of the world, of the person whom I portray - their feelings and states. I want to paint real people as they are.

**Has there been a specific time that you recall not having your voice heard?**

It does happen to me, as to everybody, occasionally.

**Do you have a network of other artists you rely on - and what do you do to support each other?**

As I mentioned before, I'm a member of the Mosaic Group - an association of young artists. Also, I run some workshops at Królestwo Bez Kresu, in Cracow, where a few of my works are exhibited.

**What do you want to achieve with your art?**

I want to grow with my art. I want it to be more mature, skilled. I want it to change with me. One day, I'd like to live off that.

**What's your biggest barrier to being an artist? How do you address it?**

I still learn a lot. Art is hard work.

**When do you talk about your art?**

I'd say every moment is a wonderful occasion to talk about it: exhibitions, meetings - both private and public.

**Why did you decide to cooperate with the SO CLOSE Project?**

We received an invitation as a Mosaic Group to create a project and conduct workshops;

the project seemed to us very interesting and innovative; it was something new for us, so we took up the challenge.

**Did the project give you some new opportunities? If so, which?**

Meeting people is always a great way to learn something new. People who brought their real stories with them, who had to experience, share those moments with us —also, watching them express those thoughts onto the canvas.

**What was the most interesting part of the cooperation?**

Seeing different people, sometimes strangers, sharing their thoughts with others.

**Do you think the experience with SO CLOSE will anyhow influence your art?**

I think it gave me a new, broader perspective on seeking into people.

**What did you learn from the cooperation?**

Cooperation with the institution and better organisation of workshops

**What opportunities does the project give to artists like you?**

It allows you to conduct workshops to invent them from scratch and show art to a wider audience, allowing you to reach people who do not work in visual art on a daily basis.

**What is your opinion on the relationship between art and new technologies?**

Art and technology today are partners. We discover new ways to reach people with our



work. I think it depends on us, on which direction it may lead.

### **Do you use new technologies in your artistic practice? Why?**

Not yet, but I'm really a huge fan of VR.

### **What role can contemporary artists play in building stronger local communities?**

The world is changing quickly. A contemporary artist could be a response, not only as a person who's locked in the studio, but as one to open this place, share the skills and knowledge and take some actions.

### **How can contemporary artists help to build stronger local communities?**

Cooperation is the key word today. I think we need to learn how to build a relationship with different individuals, as it may have a stronger impact on the future.

### **Are you trying to support local communities and integration practices through your art? If so, how?**

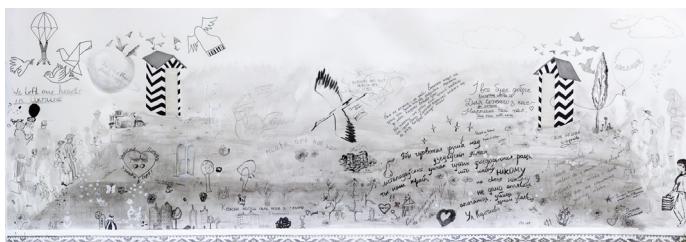
Yes, I do open workshops to the public, both lectures and crafts. I try to show that art is not exclusive, but it can be a tool.



Agnieszka Hallmann and Kasia Ioffe with participants of the Villa Decius Open Day, Krakow 2022, SO-CLOSE Project Archive

### **Do you think that contemporary art and artists, especially those with experience of forced emigration, have the potential to address social issues such as, for example, exclusion and other forms of inequality in an innovative way? Can they be catalysts for social innovation? Please explain your point of view.**

Every person is unique in their own thoughts, shapes and feelings - and understanding that is a key to speaking. We, as a people, always seek fulfilment, and that need could be used as a tool to share their experiences.



Mosaic co-created by participants of the VDA Open Day, Cracow 2022, SO-CLOSE Project Archive



# “The perfect way to showcase the accomplishments and skills of refugees”

## – The Greek Forum of Refugees on the SO-CLOSE Tools

Nikolas Kortessis and Photene Kalpakioti



The Greek Forum of Refugees (GFR) is a non-profit association consisting of refugee and migrant communities, individuals and professionals working all together to support and empower asylum seekers, refugees, migrants and stateless persons. The association was founded in Athens in 2013 in order to function as a reference organisation, both for the refugee communities and for the refugees who wish to address collectively and in an organised manner their requests to the State, but also to the host society. Under this prism, we considered that our participation in SO CLOSE could bring the positions and opinions of refugees to the fore, even more, essentially changing the narrative both at the national and European levels.

### The SO CLOSE Tools – the web doc and the virtual exhibition

The Greek Forum of Refugees decided to make use of the web doc as well as the virtual exhibition.

The decision on these options was made through conducting interviews and focus groups with refugees, non-governmental organisations as well as state representatives. The digital exhibition is the appropriate tool as it gives us the possibility to reverse the existing narratives regarding refugees. More specifically, we can reverse narratives that present refugees as people who live only through benefits and are presented as part of the problem, highlighting aspects and talents of them that the local society does not know, while at the same time, they are presented as active citizens and as people with obligations and rights.





"Syrian Refugees" 1943. Picture from the GFR web doc. Source description in references.

**“ Using the web doc and virtual exhibition not only can compare similar refugee cases from the past to the present. But these platforms are also a perfect way to showcase the accomplishments and skills of Refugees. A lot of refugees have difficulty justifying their capabilities, skills, and qualifications as they have lost their papers on the journey to Europe. ”**

We chose the web doc as it enabled us to present, on the one hand, the real situation experienced by the refugees who are coming to Greece, and on the other, the highlighting of common life experiences with the respective displaced populations (women on the island of Trikeri) during of the civil war. Through the webdoc, we can highlight even more common points and life experiences of the refugees of the past and today, thus strengthening the need for social cohesion and the creation of meaningful social integration.

**“ In the web doc, the favourite feature is the possibility to use the 360 cameras as it can be seen in the chapter created by the Afghans, you can have a complete view of the situation inside the refugee camps. ”**

Knowing the need to change the existing narratives regarding refugees in Greece through the use of the virtual exhibition, we intend to highlight even more examples of people who managed to make a difference and who highlighted through their actions the importance of social integration.

**“ In the digital exhibition, our favourite feature is the possibility to upload 3D objects, as the viewer can in this way, process objects with symbolic value in-depth and in every detail. ”**



'We are the future', part of the GFR virtual exhibition 'A Mirror to the Past From the Greek Islands to Aleppo and from Aleppo to the Greek Islands', SO-CLOSE Project Archive



These platforms help to show the talents and skills of Refugees from when we started in 2016 to today. We needed a way to showcase this work and thanks to So Close and the SO CLOSE Tools, we got the opportunity to show the milestones of some of the Refugees we cooperate with.

## Content gathering

Wanting to highlight the essential connection between past and present, we decided that both in the web doc and in the digital exhibition, refugees would be the best choice in order to collect the appropriate content and edit it. So, we created three groups of refugees consisting of Afghans, Kurds and Syrians with the aim of creating a holistic picture of reality. We provided these teams with the necessary technical equipment and they proceeded to collect and edit the content. This is evident both in the digital exhibitions and in the chapters of the web doc, as each group followed a different script, material and way of presenting it.

## Our Tools for other institutions

SO CLOSE's tools is an excellent choice for any cultural institution that wants to engage with and highlight issues of forced displacement and migration. Thus, we believe that cultural institutions can find "gathered" enough information on how to connect the past with the present, while at the same time, digital tools can act as a trigger for further research and action. A typical example is the UNHCR, which at the presentation of the tools at the open day event in Athens, expressed the desire for further cooperation and substantial strengthening of these tools.



# I „Inspiration from life, with its darkness and light” – Jason Noah, contributor to the SO-CLOSE Project

Salim (Jason Noah), 32 years old, from Iraqi Kurdistan, studied community health in Iraq, worked in a health district as a health inspector, in Iraqi Kurdistan and as an access controller and interpreter with an Oil company in Iraqi Kurdistan. Volunteering with many humanitarian organisations and NGOs in Greece.



## **What kind of art do you create?**

I use oil and acrylic for my paintings and I do different types of art, depending on how I feel. When I'm happy, the painting would be colourful and carry hope; when I'm sad or disappointed, I screen through my art and the painting will carry a message of disappointment or anger.

## **Where do you find your inspiration?**

From life itself with its darkness and light, I am someone who feels everything and everyone also I see minute details in everything. I feel the pain or a wounded butterfly I feel the pain of a refugee, a lonely cat, a bird in a cage and at the same time, I feel so happy seeing happy people, hearing the sound of rain the beauty of nature.

## **Did your migration background influence or change your art? How?**

Yes, for sure, as a Genocide survivor who fled from his country and being 10 months on the

way until arriving in France, I changed my vision, and of course, I had to deliver all those messages of the Yazidi Genocide, a long and risky way until I arrived in Greece, living on social welfare in Greece, and the kindness of Greek people.

## **What differences are there being an artist in your homeland and the country you currently live?**

While living in my country, life wasn't easy and there were many other priorities; first, the changes in daily life and non-safe life and being not appreciated as the artist didn't give us the opportunity to paint as we do now. I started to paint for real in Greece to avoid being stressed and the psychological issues; also, to deliver the messages and that was easier than in my country because there was support from Greek people and from other Volunteers, now being in France, it's easier to have art materials exhibitions, contacts and the appreciation of art.



*“Love Roots” by Jason Noah*  
**What does art mean to you?**

Art is a saver, pain killer when I need to express my anger and stress; it's also the greatest opportunity to create my own world, safe, beautiful, and as big as I want on a canvas.

**Does your art have a message?  
If so, which?**

My art usually carries messages and that was one of the reasons that I started to paint; I keep trying to deliver the messages of refugees, the Yazidi Genocide, the war, injustice, also positivity and hope.



“Love Roots” by Jason Noah,  
artist’s private archive

**Has there been a specific time that  
you recall not having your voice  
heard?**

Yes, unfortunately, many times, because I've been through a lot of pain and injustice and violence when ISIS attacked us, they killed about 8,000 people, kidnapped more than

5,000 girls and children and sadly, we didn't see any real help! Then also, trying to find a safe land is always so risky and difficult and there wasn't an easier way, but no one really hears and understands that from governments.

**Do you have a network of other artists  
you rely on - and what do you do to  
support each other?**

Yes, I do, especially my two brothers, Ismail and Salam, who are both artists and we work together. And I'm also an admin of a Yazidi artists network on social media which we use to show the art of Yazidis around the world.

**What do you want to achieve with  
your art?**

Peace! For the world than for my soul.

**What's your biggest barrier to being  
an artist? How do you address it?**

Nothing special!

**When do you talk about your art?**

When I feel that I have paintings that carry a lot of responsibilities and an important message to show.

**Do you feel that your art community  
challenges existing barriers and  
assumptions?**

It depends on the place where I live.

**Why did you decide to cooperate  
with the SO CLOSE Project?**

Because of their goals to contribute to social cohesion and fight refugee marginalisation.



## **What is your contribution to the SO CLOSE Project?**

Showing my art and delivering the message to support the SO CLOSE great and important project.

## **Did the project give you some new opportunities? If so, which?**

Yes, by showing my art.



“Untold Story” by Jason Noah,  
artist’s private archive

## **What was the most interesting part of the cooperation?**

The common missions, ideas and importance of the project.

## **What did you learn from the cooperation? What opportunities does the project give to artists like you?**

That there are supporters of the most peaceful way to express ourselves, which is art. It gives artists more motivation and hopes to keep doing what they do and to make their way easier to for passing their thoughts and messages.

## **What is your opinion on the relationship between art and new technologies?**

The new technology can be so positive or even negative for the artists, it's the easiest way to show our art to the maximum audience, but it also can be a way of changing the directions of the real art and an opportunity for the fake art.

## **Do you use new technologies in your artistic practice? Why?**

Yes, to be able to get to the widest possible audience.

## **What role can contemporary artists play in building stronger local communities?**

Art has always had and has a great role in building strong communities.

## **How can contemporary artists help to build stronger local communities?**

Artists are able to show the world in different ways also, they can show things that can't be seen. To help people to FEEL and to appreciate things.

## **Are you trying to support local communities and integration practices through your art? If so, how?**

I try to show the people that it's true that evil exists, but there is goodness, too; there is light and there is hope. I try to show that I care about that and I want everyone to care about feeling the happiness and the sadness of each other, to be closer to each other.



**Do you think that contemporary art and artists, especially those with experience of forced emigration, have the potential to address social issues such as, for example, exclusion and other forms of inequality in an innovative way? Can they be catalysts for social justice?**

Yes, we heard and saw that artists have historically used various tools to address the social issues of importance and provoke society, like war, injustice, racism, violence, and equality. Art can be such an effective tool; it has a great ability to focus the community on social problems. Art can help people connect with some aspect of social reality in a manner that they could otherwise have not without the aid of art.



"The boat painting reminds me of the small boat that we used to get to Greece from Turkey, the boat that we trusted to carry our dream and our tired bodies can't be forgotten.", artist's private archive



# I „Stepping out of imaginary world” – Muhammad Nakam, contributor to the SO-CLOSE Project

My name is Muhammad Nakam, I was born in the Village northern Iraq, Kurdish region in 1985 but grew and studied in Sulaimania city. I am an author (poems and stories) and an artist (paintings and sculptures).



I was inspired by literature, and my first love opened all the gates of my imagination to approach her in our tiny culture. But by the way, when I immigrated to Greece, I cached several new sources of inspiration by stepping out of the imaginary world and touching reality. New situation, new culture, the new length of freedom, memories, dreams, fresh pains... all of them gave me a new insight to see myself better. I felt I had a thousand words to tell, but because I didn't know any foreign language, I could transform them into art.

In my homeland, I was active as an author, and most of my stories are based on my life and my society. Some of them were forbidden to be published; anything can be a character for me, like my penis or the breast of a girl can talk to my society, but since I am here, I am only active as an artist.

For Muhammad, art is a spiritual converter – “for me converting pain and dirty

to joy and beauty”. Via his art, he wants to create an identity as a human first, then as an artist. “The message I have behind my artworks can change according to circumstances; for now, I must tell I am alive and exist”. He doesn't talk about his art as much as he can; he lets his artworks talk about him.

Asked about his biggest barrier to being an artist, he says, “I can't deal with my daily life in a normal way; my sensitivity makes me weak and strong at the same time”.

In his opinion, art communities in these decades don't have that much power.

He decided to cooperate with SO CLOSE, to remark another step of his artistic journey. His contribution to the project is love and wishes for success, and the biggest opportunity the project gave him is introducing him to new audiences. He also mentions “exchanging ideas” as an opportunity the cooperation gave him.



New technologies are helpful and create a network important for artists. “Technologies can help an artist to do research or learn new techniques, make a fast connection”. Yet, Muhammad prefers to use only raw materials.

Muhamad feels that contemporary art and artists may play in building stronger local communities by creating a group and having a series of activities. Those activities are based on the situation of their community. He himself was a participant in some activities with local children and adults in parks, where he painted on cardboards and used stencils with visitors.

“If the activity is organised well it can have good affection on the society; it can be as a single artist or group of artist at the same time performing their idea about the same issue or installation in the public area or video art on the network”.



Nakam's work, 2019, artist's private archive



# The SO-CLOSE Consortium

The SO-CLOSE Consortium are nine institutions located in five countries. They all have one mission. In the current global context of forced migrations, the most important for them is to contribute to social cohesion and fight refugee marginalization or exclusion by facilitating the encounters between similar life stories. These goals can be achieved through the mediation of innovative digital and artistic tools.

## The Autonomous University of Barcelona

The Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) is one of the major public universities in Spain. It is located in Bellaterra, close to Barcelona city. UAB has over 37,700 students, almost 3,700 researchers and teaching staff, and it hosts more than 6,000 foreign students. In recent years, the UAB has seen recognition for its efforts in promoting quality in teaching, in attracting international talent and in obtaining a growing impact in research, together with a progressive improvement in its classifications in the most prestigious and influential international rankings. UAB coordinates the SO-CLOSE project and leads tasks for setting up the user engagement strategy, identifying focus groups, evaluating the pilots and managing the dissemination, implementation, and evaluation.



## Lund University

Lund University was founded in 1666 and is ranked among the world's top 100 universities. The University has 40 000 students and 7 600 staff based in Lund, Helsingborg and Malmö. Lund is the most popular study location in Sweden. The University offers one of the broadest ranges of programmes and courses in Scandinavia, based on cross-disciplinary and cutting-edge research. The University has a distinct international profile, with partner universities in 67 countries.



## Villa Decius Association

Villa Decius Association was established in 1995 by well-known representatives of the polish worlds of science, economy, and culture. Within several years Villa Decius has been defined as a cultural institution of international outreach. The renaissance palace and garden complex of Villa become a base for the Association's activities continuing the idea of a place for the dialogue of cultures and meeting point of people, artists and scientists.



## Peace School Foundation of Monte Sole

The Peace School Foundation of Monte Sole, created in 2002, has its registered office and its operating facilities in the Historical Park of Monte Sole, founded in 1989 by a law of the Emilia Romagna Region. Its aim is to promote training and peace education projects, non-violent conflict resolution, respect of human rights, for a peaceful living together among different people and cultures, for a society without xenophobia, racism and any other kind of violence towards human beings and their environment.



## Exile Memorial Museum Consortium

The Exile Memorial Museum Consortium is a public body constituted for the establishment and joint management, in the town of La Jonquera, of the Museum under this name, whose object is the exhibition, research, interpretation and dissemination of history and memory related to the Spanish Civil War, republican exile and Franco dictatorship, taking also into account the phenomenon of exile globally in the context of the twentieth century until today.



## The Centre for Research and Technology-Hellas

The Centre for Research and Technology-Hellas (CERTH), founded in 2000, is the only research centre in Northern Greece and one of the largest in the country. CERTH has important scientific and technological achievements in many areas including: Energy, Environment, Industry, Mechatronics, Information & Communication, Transportation & Sustainable Mobility, Health, Agro-biotechnology, Smart farming, Safety & Security, as well as several cross-disciplinary scientific areas.



## ENGINEERING Ingegneria Informatica S.p.A.

ENGINEERING Ingegneria Informatica S.p.A. is the head company of the ENGINEERING Group. Engineering was founded in 1980, and it is currently the first IT group in Italy, among the top 10 IT groups in Europe, quite 101.000 employees and 650 branch offices in Italy and abroad, with an established presence in Belgium, Norway, Republic of Serbia, Latin America and USA.



## La Tempesta

La Tempesta is a professional consulting services and a digital and media production company. It is consulting services that involves strategy, management and digital transformation for public and private organisations.

As a digital and media production company, they specialize in giving cultural heritage (immaterial, historical, artistic, architectural, landscape, documents ...) a digital expression.



## The Greek Forum of Refugees

The Greek Forum of Refugees (GFR) is a registered non-profit making Association established in Athens, Greece, in 2012. Its overall aim is to support the unity of the refugee communities based in Greece and at the European level and to foster refugees' inclusion within their host society by encouraging their active participation and need to be recognized as skilled and knowledgeable individuals. GFR is therefore actively engaged in Empowerment, Advocacy, Awareness-raising and Rights protection.



The SO-CLOSE Project uses cultural heritage and innovative tools to improve social cohesion and promote mutual understanding. Smart management, creative ideas, international knowledge and cooperation helps to create tools to bring people and cultures together.

# From so far to so close.





Project Consortium



Universitat Autònoma  
de Barcelona



Museu Memorial  
de l'Exili



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/  
LA TEMPESTA

# Source references

- p. 13 picture of Moussa Molla Salih. Source: SO-CLOSE Project Archive.
- p. 21 picture of Javier Zamora. Source: Artist's private archive.
- p. 31 picture of Łucja Piekarska. Source: Artist's private archive.
- p. 37 picture of Kasia Ioffe. Source: Artist's private archive.
- p. 42 picture of Vsevolod Pozdejev. Source: Artist's private archive.
- p. 44 picture of Nina Dzwoki. Source: Artist's private archive.
- p. 47 picture of Natalia Koktysz photographed by Maria Wojewodzic. Source: Artist's private archive
- p. 49 picture of Agnieszka Hallmann. Source: Artist's private archive.
- p. 53 Syrian Refugees, 1943. Picture from the book „Bratsos Nassos, Aegean refugees in World War II. A survival odyssey through the narratives of the protagonistst, Athens, Notios Anemos, 2017”.
- p. 55 picture of Jason Noah. Source: Artist's private archive.
- p. 59 picture of Muhammad Nakam. Source: Artist's private archive.



