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## Special Issue: Art for the Sake of Care

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### *INTERMEZZO IV*

#### **Looking Outwards in Port-to-Port: Social Practice in the Context of Social Distancing**

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'It is porous, and it is soft and it is full of potential...  
it is aware of itself also being hostile' (Alisa Oleva).

This Intermezzo explores the process of developing and delivering socially engaged artist projects within the context of the coronavirus pandemic. The focus is 'Port-to-Port', a commission by contemporary artist Alisa Oleva that took place across 2020-2021 in Felixstowe, a town in the Eastern region of the UK, which inspired the work of Pier Projects Art Agency, co-founded in 2017. I will provide an overview of the commissioning process, the artist's methodology, the work that arose and how the learnings that emerged have informed future thinking and programming from an organizational perspective.

Rooted in personal experience of working alongside artists during this period, this contribution is consciously located within the realm of professional practice rather than academic theory. It is offered in the spirit of critical reflection and enquiry - a process I believed is still on-going as we begin to consider our lives and work 'post-pandemic' - to invite a shared space of considering if shifts within social practice occurred across the 2020-22 and where the artform finds itself, now. What challenges, opportunities and forms of care-giving emerged or proliferated during the pandemic?

### **Artistic and Curatorial Labor as Care-Giving**

Before I delve deeper into this commission, I want to acknowledge my position, the frames of reference that guide this reflection and its context within the larger whole of art and care ethics. My role was that of commissioner and curator of Port-to-Port, one I have long regarded as primarily supportive, facilitatory and dialogic. The connections and mutual dependency between artist, commissioner, communities and place constitute a square of relations and circle of trust that, I believe, underpin socially-engaged work. By its very nature - replete with unknown conditions and contexts with multiple agents informing the process and outcome - care-giving is an essential facet of curatorial labor for socially-engaged projects. This framing references the Latin of the role 'cura' but reorientates the act of care from looking after an object or collection, towards care for others: artists, communities and audiences.

When it comes to acts of care within this context, artistic and curatorial work may be thought of as two sides of the same coin. The labor of artists whose work is derived from and responds to people and place, where site and communities are both primary materials and modes of

delivery, socially engaged-artists are similarly harnessing as care-based practices; through enabling connections between individuals and groups and holding space for community knowledge and amplifying what that knowledge can do. As artists and curators of socially engaged practices, therefore, acts of care are critical to the relations that emerge from projects that are people and place-centered and those which truly commit to collaboration.

The pandemic irrevocably shifted these conditions within which socially engaged-artists work and the dynamics of the relations that underpin the work. Many artists were forced to pause, recalibrate and reevaluate how their artwork could be created and mediated within the limits of the Stay Home Mandate. Meanwhile, arts organizations were forced to close. With these closures came new opportunities and challenges for audience engagement, which saw a proliferation not only in online programming but that which, largely through necessity, took place beyond the gallery. Some of the most impactful non-building-based projects responded to the social injustices and needs of their local communities that were highlighted in no uncertain terms by the pandemic. Did this period of heightened precarity and fragility see social practice newly acknowledged and embedded within programmes of art institutions? If so, what might this mean in terms of acknowledgement, opportunity, profile for socially-engaged artists going forward? And just returning to my curatorial position, how might the experience of the pandemic inform the practices of those working alongside socially-engaged artists to work with/as a form of care?

### ***Where Do You Find Yourself, Now? Starting with People and Place***

Before I share Alisa Oleva's commission, allow me to ground this reflection in the broader work of Pier Projects and its location. A visual art agency, Pier Projects had been working in Felixstowe for four years before the pandemic swept across the world. Founded by myself and arts educator Louise Stratford, the context of Felixstowe offered a fertile starting point for the type of artist-led work we wanted to support and we felt was lacking in the region we both live and work.<sup>1</sup> Of primary importance to both of us was to work in a complementary way both with what was already in existence within the Eastern region's art ecology but which also grew out of the specificities of place.

As a curator, my preferred way to support artists is through the creation of new work that sits outside of traditional gallery spaces. Looking across activity in the East, Louise and I felt there was space for a commissioning-led programme that operated without a building. This decision would force us to collaborate, mediate and work within the public realm or through what we describe as 'borrowed infrastructure.' Through this model of organization, we believed we could mitigate a heavy-handed, top-down approach to sit apart from the

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<sup>1</sup> [www.pierprojects.org](http://www.pierprojects.org)

gentrification-inducing modes prevalent in other coastal towns. We would start small, rooted in what already existed in Felixstowe and seek to stay nimble and responsive. Six years later, the decision to work without a fixed venue - albeit we see the town of Felixstowe in its entirety as the 'site' of our work - immediately brought to bear challenges and opportunities for care-based approaches: ones we continue to negotiate. This decision also reflected the interests that would drive the curatorial thematics and programme.

As a partnership, we wanted to draw on our respective curiosity in the siloing and instrumentalization of contemporary art and health. These interests relate to our participation in endurance running and swimming events which had prompted thinking around dualistic conceptions of mind and body and the often privileging in art of the former. Whilst the benefits of participating in arts activities is well-proven, the commissions and other activity we wanted to facilitate would wrestle with and problematize these connections between art and wellbeing, in order to explore the intersectionality of mental and physical health as well as climate justice in relation to the coast.

These thematics find relevance in Felixstowe's own heritage. During the 1850's the Suffolk town was a renowned Victorian spa resort, frequented for the health benefits of being by the including taking in the sea waters and air. This history as a spa town and the physiological benefits of its coastal location included several convalescent homes across the twentieth century, where people went to recover slowly from illness, outside of the hospital environment. The most recent home, The Bartlet, was built along the cliffs to ensure patients had panoramic sea views. Today, the reinvigorated spa gardens take pride of place along the promenade, over 200 community groups support community health and social interactions and the proliferation of walkers, sea swimmers and runners further support a profile of the town as that which fosters positive wellbeing. It was our hope, and still is, that in developing the infrastructure of an organization, we could support this characteristic of the town—its heritage and contemporary interests and activity—to be explored through an artistic lens rather than impose an externally conceived narrative.

Slowly we began to define the core areas of work that we would work with artists and communities to pursue. Commissioning would be a primary feature of our work and would be process-led, site-responsive and socially-engaged. In the first three years, we worked alongside artist and printmaker Adam Bridgland, artist and researcher Caroline Wright and conceptual artist Anna Brownstead as Artists-in-Residence with open briefs. Circling back to ideas of care-based approaches, the process sought to counter didactic approaches of what is to be created by the artists and instead offer time, space and resources to respond to Felixstowe. We wanted to offer flexibility and greater access to the opportunity, mindful of parental or caring responsibilities and the various roles and forms of labour that many artists

undertake, offering a non-continuous model over at least months. These commissions were developed through artist residencies with open briefs and the works created explored the benefits of Blue Spaces on mental and physical well-being, lived experiences of PTSD post-war and, highly prescient of what was to emerge in March 2020, air quality and breathing health.

### **Walking Together; Apart**

When coronavirus took hold and the Stay Home' Mandate was issued, Pier Projects programme, like all art organizations and public services, had to adapt. We did not have doors to physically shut, gallery walls that would remain empty or a collection that would require care. Nevertheless, given the primary importance given to connecting people physically in the same place at the same time in our work, moving our programme online, as many galleries and arts organizations did, was not in keeping with the core methodologies on which Pier Projects was founded. During the first lockdown, we reflected on the possibilities that having a nimble model might present. In considering how we might respond, we took time to explore what artists and audiences might need alongside our capacity in relation to the physical restrictions, consulting with artists whose practices had been upended to understand challenges they were facing and primary needs. It became clear as the rhythms of the lockdown were established, that one opportunity that Pier Projects could offer could grow out of the hour of daily exercise we were afforded. Our decision was to share an artist's open call to respond to a loose brief inspired by the act of walking. The intention was to offer new ways to interact with and explore Felixstowe: it was both a practical response to navigating the new conditions within which we could support artists to make new work but it also enabled us to test new, collaborative ways of working with local community.

Previous artist commissions had been developed through existing relationships with artists based in the East. For this commission, we sought to move away from this traditional dynamic of organization - artist - audience and towards more distributive modes of decision-making. Inspired by projects rooted in ideas of community-based assets and knowledge, we invited Felixstowe residents to shape and participate in an arts panel to select the artist to be commissioned. There was no prerequisite for prior experience of being involved with arts projects but an interest in health and wellbeing was encouraged in order to establish a group with an emotional connection to the themes.

### **Care and Community-Centered Decision Making**

A group of six respondents with backgrounds in healthcare, the arts and local government amongst others, formed the final panel. We utilised local networks and infrastructure to share the opportunity, targeting local magazines, online groups, public notice boards and marshaling

our own connections. On a practical level, online meetings were the only means to develop the panel and we had to remain sensitive to the time commitment we required of those participating, balancing this with the ability to offer the tools and trust necessary for the group to feel confident in the process. The process of forming the panel generated important questions central to democratic decision-making, including those of representation, inclusion, transparency and ownership. One such question was, how could we ensure the panel felt suitably equipped and empowered to commission their preferred artist?

Several key decisions informed the commission process. Pier Projects shortlisted the applicants and those four artists and collaboratives presented their initial ideas outlining how they would respond to the commission to the panel. The selection of shortlisted artists sought to reflect the breadth of artistic approaches, conceptual starting points and mediums of the vast number of responses which the open call had elicited. In order to mitigate any potential bias we invited consultant and critical friend Katherine Wood to moderate the selection process and ensured that organizationally, we were absent from the final discussions that took place between the panelists and moderator.

Russian-born, London-based walking artist Alsa Oleva was one of the shortlisted artists and the only artist to make an application via video. Her initial response to the brief was remarkable not only in her ability to demonstrate her sensitivity of approach but in her thoughtful and creative response to the specificity of Felixstowe. When I think about the essential constituents of care-based practices, attributes which are immediately conjured include 'attention', 'responsiveness' and 'duty.' According to the feedback from the panel, it was Oleva's demonstration of these characteristics that resonated deeply with all six of them. In describing her approach, Oleva recalled how ahead of the interviews, she had visited Felixstowe, arriving by boat from Harwich across the River Stour in order to come in close contact with the UK's largest container port. The artist's desire to literally 'see' the town from a different perspective - the water - and awareness of the international connections, reach and profile as a result of its port secured her the commission and offered the conceptual and thematic foundations from which the artworks emerged.



*Figure 1.* Photograph by C. C., Hongmaogang (literally «Ginger-Hair Port») in Kaohsiung, Taiwan alongside photograph by S A Cartwright. The path from under the cliffland car park to the Ferry, Felixstowe. Presented within Alisa Oleva’s Port-to-Port postcard collection.

### **Port-to-Port: Distributive Acts of Care**

Over the next five months, Oleva undertook a self-organized residency, visiting Felixstowe during the periods when restrictions were relaxed. The selection process with the community panel had offered the artist initial conversations with local residents which she built upon through the development phase of her commission. Oleva first sought to understand the topography, geography and architecture of the town more deeply: a reflection of her ‘site-sensual’ practice. To do so, she invited Felixstowe residents to share buildings, views, sites, locations and monuments that inspire them day-to-day or hold particularly special memories. Responses varied from locations that shape people’s daily rhythms to those that recall key moments of a person’s life. These memories conjured sights, smells, sounds and feelings drawn specifically from Felixstowe to create an embodied map emerged and it was through this newly imagined cartography, Oleva’s expansive, interdisciplinary artworks began to form.

Oleva has amassed a wide, international network across the last decade. This is, in part, due to what she describes as having ‘multiple homes’ having moved from Russia to London in 2006, but can also be attributed to having participated in numerous residences all over the world. The significance of Felixstowe’s container port, the largest in the UK, and the heightened metaphor of international movement and connections it presented within the context of the pandemic, immediately struck Oleva as she arrived on the boat from Harwich and was also incorporated in many of the community responses. To acknowledge this and to extend the project beyond Felixstowe, the artist sent each of the locations and accompanying memories collected locally to someone living in a different port town with an invitation to respond.

Working across different zones amidst the pandemic caused Oleva challenges. Not only was she corresponding with over fifty contributors to the project, she also chose to collaborate with a sound artist and graphic designer also based beyond the UK. The scale of the relationships she was attempting to develop, mediate and represent was weighty and at times, proved conceptually and practically challenging: there were moments where the intensely co-creative processes and their wide geographic reach could have undone or undermined the artist’s intentions.

Oleva was, however, able to reach people in port towns in all corners of the globe. Locations included Singapore, Istanbul, Ontario and Mairupol, with twenty-five exchanges taking place in total. Materially, the postcards and audio became symbolic of these two locations and their contributors ‘meeting.’ Photographs from the paired towns are overlaid on postcards alongside description of each place of significance, creating a visual and textural hybrid of these port towns. Oleva extended this mirroring into an audio work, formed of resident voices describing the memories and places beyond Felixstowe and collected sound material. The recording was shared through in-person, collective walking events and offered as a standalone broadcast. The means through which people could access the broadcast offered Oleva an additional means to create a direct connection to the listener and responded to the history of pirate radio associated with Felixstowe: a request sent to the artist for a specific date and time and literally sent and received as an intimate exchange. Reaching far beyond Felixstowe, the postcard sets and broadcast set in motion a signal for action, sparking a relay of transmitted memories and forming a web of connections between people living near and far. Whilst the contributors are unlikely to meet face-to-face, Oleva enabled people living in vastly different places to feel the presence of another person’s life elsewhere.





*Figure 2.* Photograph by Elspeth (Billie) Penfold, Bishopstone, Whitstable, Kent alongside photograph by Lauren Carr of Trimley, Felixstowe. Presented within Alisa Oleva’s Port-to-Port postcard collection.

In the commissioned essay of Oleva’s commission, ‘Port to Port: Making Connections Near and Far. Transmissions of Care and Collectivity across Liquid Boundaries’, artist and researcher Gudrun Filipka writes:

the distance between collaborators and their transmissions surely becomes a space for multiple affinities across liquid boundaries, one full of voices: merging with lost radio transmissions, old Mayday signals, pirate radio static. Flowing over subterranean gas pipes, internet cables, to emerge in Mainland Europe. Then speeding towards Mariupol, towards Moscow, towards Canada – voices becoming multifarious across time, distorted, echoing (glitching perhaps) but always received....<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted within ‘Port to Port: Making Connections Near and Far. Transmissions of Care and Collectivity across Liquid Boundaries.’ Gudrun Filipka, commissioned by Pier Projects.

Indeed, despite the context of heightened isolation, Oleva's desire to collaborate with over 50 residents of port town globally and her holding of space for these contributions through ongoing dialogue and the layered means through which people can access these memories, voices and stories, was quite remarkable. Whilst vast in scope and geographical reach, Oleva managed the rare feat of creating a sense of intimacy through these exchanges of not the people but the places in which they reside. This, to me, is care-based methodologies deployed with genuine sensitivity.

The 'softness' of the works Oleva created and the generosity with which she extended the works out to others, could belie the directness of their political nature. Oleva's openness to bringing together multiple protagonists in the work countered the protectionist and divisive rhetoric that gathered pace during the pandemic, where theories of the virus's origin were attributed to 'foreign' places. The pandemic amplified and problematized our sense of self and community: caught as we were between the need for collective action and community whilst receiving reminders to individuate; 'Wash your Hands', 'Stay Aware', and 'Isolate.' In discussing the works with artist and researcher Gudrud Filipiska, Oleva describes the complexity she saw in Felistowe's geography during the pandemic:

I am very much aware of the hostility of this coast and of people trying to cross borders in containers and not making it...so I don't try and romanticize the sea as a source of transmission, of possibility, of movement, of coming and going – sending and receiving, but I am trying to highlight its potential and also the presence of others...<sup>3</sup> Embedding and Advocating for Care-Based Approaches as Curatorial Work.

Sharing Alisa Oleva's commission 'Port-to-Port' has allowed me to reflect on the changed conditions within which socially-engaged practice operated under during the pandemic but the potential it offered to look outwards. Oleva found a way to centralized acts of care as a guiding motivation and mode of working across artists and audiences' relations through a restless and genuine curiosity to understand and learn from others. Port-to-Port was a striking example of how socially-engaged practices can counter the dominant mode of contemporary art: that by design it is exclusive.

Oleva's experience of developing and delivering Port-to-Port was symptomatic of the challenges and opportunities faced by other artists whose work is rooted in place-responsive approaches and participatory methodologies which the pandemic upended. Such shifts in the relations that occurred between artist, curator, audiences and place were not exclusive to

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted within 'Port to Port: Making Connections Near and Far. Transmissions of Care and Collectivity across Liquid Boundaries.' Gudrun Filipiska, commissioned by Pier Projects

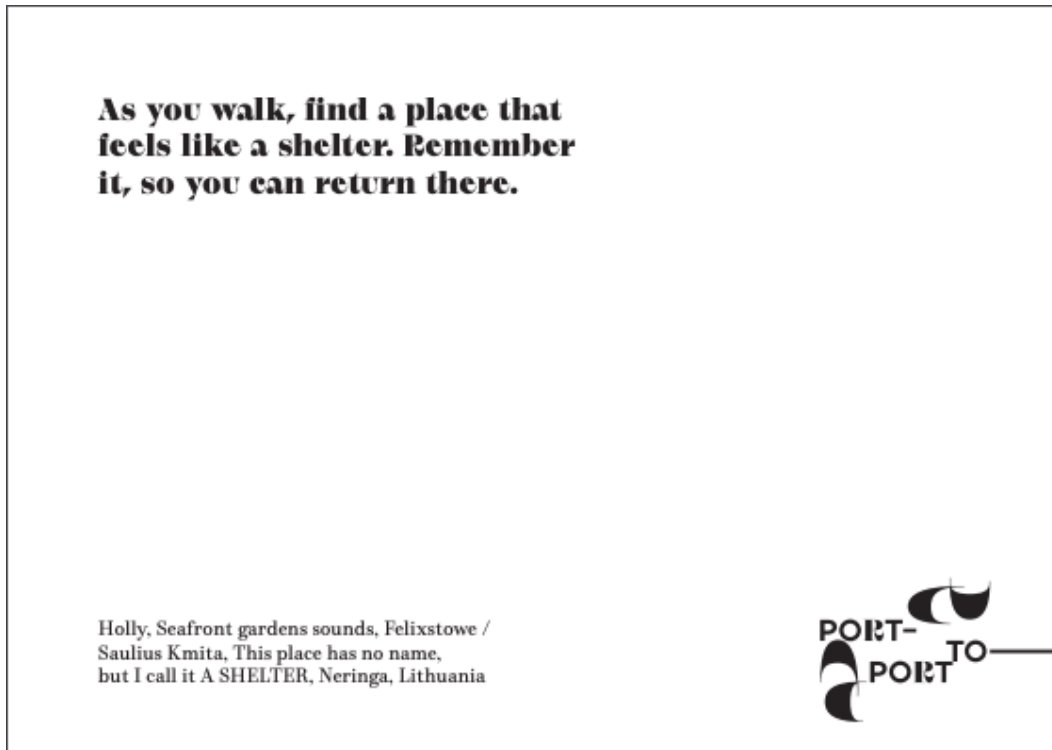
socially-engaged artists, however. Galleries and other art institutions sought to redefine their programme and offer when business as usual was no longer an option. In short, there was a move not only online but an opening out and looking towards local communities, exploring how to serve their needs more directly. Commissioning socially-engage became a gateway, or a ‘portal’ to do this and opportunities for artists with a social or relational practice proliferated.

Some innovative commissioning models were established: ones which removed or disrupted traditional hierarchies of organization - artist and the didactic outcomes that are often requisite. Notable examples include ‘Let Artists be Artists’ residencies hosted by Gloucester-based Strike a Light who appointed four artists to ‘just be artists’ — working on an employment salary for 2.5 years, with no predetermined outcomes to their activity. It was in fact Alisa Oleva who introduced me to this initiative.<sup>4</sup>

More common, however, was what many artists I have had discussions with since have identified as being an increase in instrumentalization of socially-engaged practice rather than of opportunity. In spite of the difficulties in accessing real-time interaction with communities and other stakeholders in the development and delivery of the commissions, many artists felt that they had been able to adapt their reflexive practices in order to create works and foster relations based on openness, trust, mutual participation and learning. The ability of the artist to broker collaborations with local communities in such challenging circumstances and the methodologies they employed to do so, in their view, were not absorbed by the commissioner and instead, largely left at the gallery door. That in fact, despite the pandemic, institutionally-speaking it was business as usual.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://strikealight.org.uk/let-artists-be-artists>



*Figure 3.* From Alisa Oleva's Port-to-Port postcard collection.

The conversations with socially-engaged artists were disheartening and I was mindful that our organization took the learnings forward. Pier Projects is the largest curatorial project I have undertaken and I recognize that with the infrastructure of the organization which offers opportunity and capacity to work with artists and communities, comes the duty to do so with and through care-based approaches. The need to process the pandemic and instill what had emerged methodologically and ethically, felt so significant that our response was to pause. It was imperative to understand more deeply what socially-engaged artists required to make work and I felt strongly that as an organization we could only do this in direct dialogue with an artist we could learn from and alongside.

### **Reciprocal Care: Artist and Commissioner and New Support Structures**

In 2023, we appointed Samantha Jones - artist, curator and researcher whose doctorate examines her embedded practice within durational models of sustainable community wealth building - as our new Artist-in-Residence. This commission was conceived to be truly reciprocal, as a mutual sounding board, facilitator, care-giver and critical friend. It also sought to ensure artists sit front and centre of what we do and how we work: to acknowledge the breadth of insights, knowledge and skills brought to communities, organization, collaborators and place through commissioning. In describing what encouraged her to apply for the

residency, the artist wrote:

Post Covid, the thematic of ‘On Convalescence’ resonates as an important and timely area to interrogate as an artist. This residency brings a unique opportunity to hold a transparent dialogue and test new ways of working together, in a phase of open experimentation within Pier Project to co-question their very ways of working with communities, builds upon my durational practice of social co-productions economies, commons and care.

The programme sought to consider ways in which the platform of an arts organization can create new opportunities for artists and communities to creatively and critically participate in debates about individual and collective wellbeing and forge new ways of working together. Through discussion and a series of happenings and public events, it offered Pier Projects time and space to reflect on what we need as individuals and communities to ‘thrive’ and thematically, explored ideas of slow recovered and, in a nod to Felixstowe’s health-based heritage, what it means to ‘convalesce.’

Whilst the residency has officially come to an end, the dialogue with Samantaha Jones is ongoing. There is shared recognition of the importance and mutual benefit of sustained relationships between artist and commissioner. Regular discussions continue, specifically regarding the fraught balance that exists between taking care of others and how we take care of ourselves: the emotional, physical and at times financial impact of fostering opportunity and capacity with collaborators whilst retaining artistic integrity. Knowing where, when and how you, as an artist or a commissioner, can make the most impact and what roles are not best served by you, emerged as a critical tension. We are actioning some of our dialogue through the development of an Artist Wellbeing Rider both as a means to consider our respective needs and in the longer-terms, to serve as a practical and advocacy tool to highlight the complexities of socially-engaged labor.

### **Reflections**

To return once more to Port-to-Port, the commission culminated in a panel discussion curated by the artist. The online salon brought together independent curator Maria Sarycheva based in Moscow and Diana Berg, the director of Platform Tu in Mariupol, Ukraine, alongside artist and researcher Gudrun Filipiska, Oleva and me. Oleva was keen to once again extend the invitation beyond Felixstowe and invite peers whose work is place-based and reflects the context within which it is situated. Censorship, repression, isolation and fear of right-wing views were explored by Sarycheva and Berg: just over four months after the event took place, the invasion to Berg’s home country took place and the reverberations were felt not only by Oleva and Pier Projects, to those who seen Mariupol in the postcards are heard the voices of a

resident contained within the sound work. In discussion with Filipka, Oleva considered what drives and enables her work: “I think it’s a practice of togetherness and of care – what allowed me to do what I do was the feeling of support and presence of other women.”<sup>5</sup>

Our collective experiences of the pandemic offered new ways of understanding the world and possibilities for living better, together. How we move forward surely depends on how we engage with questions of care not only in relation to art but to social, economic and climate justice. After the three years since lockdown began and the Ukrainian invasion that ensued, Port-to-Port could be viewed as embodying valuable, care-based practices we need to carry out in a world that is being shaped by heightened feelings of fear, distrust, anger, suspicion and loneliness. Care in the broadest sense must be valued, shared and called for. What if, as proposed by The Care Collective, care was put at the very center of life?<sup>6</sup> We might, as Oleva did through ‘Port-to-Port, turn outwards rather than inwards and move away from the ‘I’ and towards the ‘we.’

### **About the Author**

Natalie Pace is a curator, facilitator and artist development producer based in the East of England. She is drawn to work that is site-responsive, performative and participatory and through artist-led projects, she seeks to investigate collaborative, distributive and non-hierarchical ways of working. Her interests include public space, health (personal, social and environmental), the coast, food and running as a creative practice.

Working outside the gallery and exhibition format Natalie supports and collaborates with artists through commissions, research, mentoring and writing. Currently, she is Director of Pier Projects Art Agency, a not-for-profit based in Felixstowe, Suffolk, which she co-founded in 2017. Pier Projects’ exists to connect artists and communities in order to encourage critical dialogue and knowledge sharing about ‘health’ in the context of the coast.

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted within ‘Port to Port: Making Connections Near and Far. Transmissions of Care and Collectivity across Liquid Boundaries.’ Gudrun Filipka, commissioned by Pier Projects.

<sup>6</sup> Chatzidakis, A., Hakim, J., Littler J., Rottenberg C and Segal, L., *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence*, (2020), London, Verso Press.

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