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INTERMEZZO V

Curating as Caring at the Heart of Society

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Abstract

This essay argues that when art is considered to be relevant as a shared resource, then curating can be perceived as a meaningful way of taking care of the present in its perpetual transformation; a stimulus to, and a support in engaging with the questions of the era.

This potential becomes even more obvious when an artistic intervention is rooted in local communities. Curating projects strongly tied to specific situations means giving up any pre-established protocol and formula, and venturing with courage and with a radical care into the experience, always confronting with the uniqueness of the situation. This requires attention, concern, rigor, and a thorough commitment to every aspect of the project, to the process and to everyone who is involved in it. As someone involved in contemporary art and interested in a socially-centred way of curating, I trace the long-time research and curatorial trajectory of a project that I consider paradigmatic, *The Magic Mountain*, by Micol Roubini.

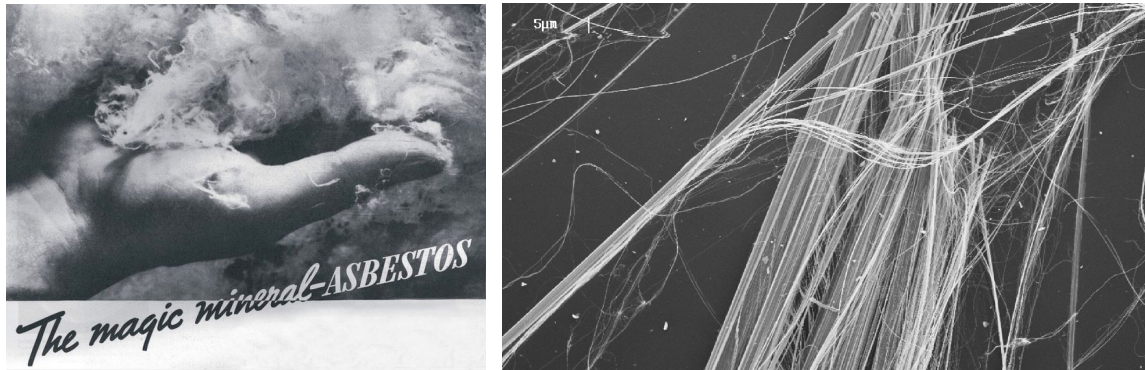


Figure 1: Asbestos Advertising, adapted from flickr, J. Manville, 1936, https://www.flickr.com/photos/asbestos_pix/5181457326

Figure 2: Asbestos Fibres Magnified Under a Microscope, image from wikimedia commons https://it.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Anthophyllite_asbestos_SEM.jpg

Does curating matter? I argue that it does, especially if we consider art to be a shared resource and the practice of curating as a critical practice. Art is indeed a way of accompanying a present, which is in perpetual transformation, of measuring oneself against the questions of the era. The works of artists are fragments, subjective and partial narratives, in which self-reflection and collective reflection tend to merge: if by representing the world, artists speak of themselves, through themselves they speak of the world.-Thus, artists create a common good made of symbols that can be shared and can contribute with reading contexts, grasping needs, moods, and the complexity of human experience.

The significance and opportunity of engaging with art emerges in diverse thinkers. From John Dewey (2005) to Umberto Eco (1991). Dewey, whose reformist action was based on trust in the potential of experience. Umberto Eco was a philosopher and semiologist who, referring to literature, summarized the power of this experience by saying that "those who don't read, at seventy will have lived only one life: their own. Those who read will have lived five thousand years [..]" (1991). This potential becomes even more relevant when an artistic intervention is rooted in site-sensitive art from local communities, when it aims to reveal their differences and commonalities.



Figure 3, 4: Ivan Cavalli, (1960) *The miners' festival of Santa Barbara*, and the excavation process, stills from 8mm, Corio, Italy, courtesy Ivan Cavalli.

Curating projects strongly tied to specific situations means curating with attention, concern, rigor, and a thorough commitment to every aspect. It also means giving up any pre-established protocol and formula, and considering the uniqueness of the project, venturing with courage into the experience, always confronting with the specificity of the situation. This is a radical commitment because it implies taking care not only of the arts and the artists, but of people, and of situations. As someone involved in contemporary art and interested in a socially-centred way of curating, I would like to trace the research and curatorial trajectory of a project that I consider paradigmatic, the process-based video-installation *The Magic Mountain*, by Micol Roubini. It is a project that lends itself to the discussion of care, because it is an effort to rehabilitate a situation that is complex and marginalized, and needs a renewed attention in order to be deeply understood. Rehabilitation takes place by bringing the situation to the centre of artistic thought and action, and thus symbolically restoring its dignity.

The Magic Mountain by Micol Roubini concerns a geographical area that is going through a time of fragility, and that is imbued with a complex history. A history whose witnesses are still present, but whose common memory is too contradictory to be easily shared. We, the author and artist are in northern Italy, about thirty kilometers from Turin: a densely populated area. Yet the territory of the towns of Corio and Balangero, with the nearby abandoned mine, once the largest open-pit asbestos factory in Europe, seems suspended in time. Micol Roubini, created a project to narrate the area's post-industrial phase. Roubini is an artist interested in the traces of memory that persist in people and places, and is driven by the aspiration to research as well as to create. For Roubini, artistic practice is strongly bound to the environment in which she operates. Her work is based on an attitude of attention toward the invisible, sensitive aspects of situations, the perceived, and even more the unperceived, the fluid and the nebulous, the removed. The choice to embark on this trajectory with her arose from trust and from considering curating as a socio-aesthetic and critical practice in progress to be shared, and art itself as a shareable repository of experiences and points of view.

Accompanying her in the context of the project meant, first of all, immersing myself in the history of asbestos uses and perception. In fact, due to its fireproof properties, asbestos has been considered an almost magical mineral for millennia, before becoming, with the Industrial Revolution, a resource to be exploited in a number of different fields.

Aggressively marketed despite its human health costs, it ultimately became acknowledged for being toxic through contamination of our bodies and the environment. It is interesting to note how seductive and widespread it was before being acknowledged for being lethal. Also we were able to see the extent to which the territory has been modified and redesigned by the mining, and how this has shaped and structured the experiences of its inhabitants. The intense asbestos extraction activity of Amiantifera —this was the name of the mine — lasted for almost eighty years, from 1918 to 1990, and is extensively recorded in materials now deposited in various archives: maps, aerial photographs, geological sections, raised relief maps and territorial plans of the area with relative contour lines. The materials were carefully archived and precisely conveyed the drastic transformation of the territory. Change occurred at an accelerated rate throughout the twentieth century in the name of the extractive economy that characterized the industrial development of the West.



Figure 5: Micol Roubini, 2023, La Montagna Magica, still from video Italy, Courtesy the artist and Lo Schermo dell'arte. Project realized with the support of the Italian Council (2022)

Images of the built environment—industrial buildings, plants, warehouses, workshops, and office blocks—illustrate the ubiquity of infrastructure and its interaction with the surrounding environment. A glimpse of daily life on-site can be gained from vintage photographs of official events and groups at work, either indoors or exploring the landscape dressed in white coats and helmets, gives us. Diagrams of processes, filing systems, images of explosions conceived to facilitate excavations shed light on operations at the mine.

During the process of Roubini's project, he developed relationships with inhabitants, leading them to share new materials that could be added to the archives: photographs, amateur videos, even a three dimensional stratigraphic model showing the rock layers of the mountain. The latter, in particular, is of great interest because on the one hand it is referred to the extraction plans and industrial exploitation of the territory in the modern era, and on the other it helps to place the story of Balangero against the backdrop of geological time, stretching to the earliest days of the planet. These documentary materials, given as a contribution to the project by the inhabitants of Corio and Balangero, can be considered proof of the relationship of trust established with the artist, who has frequented the area for approximately four years.

The mine has always been a source of narrative possibilities. After graduating in chemistry from the University of Turin in 1941, working under a pseudonym due to the racial laws, Primo Levi took a temporary job here. Tasked with investigating whether nickel could be extracted from post-processing materials, Levi's experience was rich in historical implication, not least because the quarry supplied raw materials for war industries. Levi was later inspired to write masterful pages about his time here in his collection, *The Periodic Table*. In 1954, Italo Calvino —then a member of the Italian Communist Party — penned a vivid report on mobilization at the Amiantifera for the Piedmont edition of *l'Unità* daily paper. In a period marked by heightened union power, Calvino's narrative, documenting the intense negotiations involving the striking quarry workers, opens with a strikingly visual depiction of the scene: "The car rounded the final bend and, through chestnut trees, we got a view of the asbestos mountain, its funnel-shaped peaks and slopes slanting seamlessly toward the factory. The glossy grey steps of the quarries, carved into the reddish mountain and pocked here and there with winter bushes, resembled an amphitheater; the mountain was methodically dismantled, fed into the factory's crushers, and expelled in vast mounds of debris, creating a new, formless mountain range in matte grey."



Figure 6: Micol Roubini, 2022, *The asbestos cave*, photography, Balangero, Italy, courtesy Micol Roubini.

In our vastly different historical epoch, Roubini's work delves into the intricate web of relationships forged between the local community and this evolving landscape. The artist, in her work *The Magic Mountain*, weaves together various strands of inquiry, layering them to better explore the multifaceted legacy of one of the most complex and intricate narratives in Italian industrial history. As this area endures an economic and social downturn common to many other rural areas of Italy, it also must grapple with a unique specificity, due to its past linked to asbestos cave, that permeates every facet of local life. With village populations dwindling, the region has entered a transformative phase, thanks to a comprehensive reclamation and redevelopment project to restore the mountain to the surrounding communities. And yet, because the duration of the soil remediation process is unpredictable, the whole area's future is swathed in uncertainty. The people who set the process in motion will never be able to truly oversee it, because it is nature that dictates the pace and rhythm of regeneration.



Figure 7: Micol Roubini, 2022, The remains of the asbestos factory, photography, Balangero, Italy, courtesy Micol Roubini.

The process will likely outlast the lifetimes of the people currently residing nearby. Because environmental exposure to asbestos involves a high risk for human health, the former mine and its vicinity are still off-limits. The remains of mining operations persist alongside signs of a gradual return to the wild, marked by the (spontaneous and assisted) re-emergence of various plant and animal species. Meanwhile, research into mesothelioma, a form of cancer, and other asbestos exposure-related health impacts continues in labs at the University of Turin and indeed worldwide, but thus far, no successful countermeasures are in the pipeline.

Interestingly, Roubini's investigation focuses on the dreamscapes of Corio and Balangero's residents, predominantly former workers at the mine and their relatives. The artist was motivated by seeking to understand how the situation of these places will be perceived when the generation with direct memories of the mine, who lived it and dreamt it, will not be here anymore. The dream realm serves as a conduit for sensitive, deep-seated psychological experience, perceived by Roubini not as whimsical but as a way of engaging more deeply with reality. Committed to building relationships and fostering long-term trust through collective sharing as part of an organized social dreaming approach, Roubini's attentive listening enabled locals to become conscious interpreters of their own stories, sharing their dreams as memories—each narrative an emotional wave of great intensity. Filming is, for Roubini, always the last step in a lengthy process of engagement.



Figure 8: Micol Roubini, 2023, Social dreaming session, photography, Corio, Italy, courtesy Micol Roubini.

The resulting narratives are by no means exact accounts: every story is an outcome, deconstructing and reassembling elements from various dreams. Without being diminished either in terms of verisimilitude or subjective and personal essence, each one evokes a collective vision, a sense of sharing and community. The collective narrative highlights the role of memory in daily life, in forging a sense of self that is both individual and collective.

Rooted in environmental experiences and filled with sounds, noises, and sensations conveying the feeling of being there, these dreams have a physical dimension. They tell of lives deeply

affected by past activities at Amiantifera, where massive, contaminated infrastructure still dominates the landscape, where access is prohibited to a significant portion of local land that was, once, an integral part of inhabitants' lives. Then there's the painful realization that an activity once seen as life-sustaining for the area has ultimately left a void. In the dreams of the inhabitants, the reference to all this is constant. Their visions take the form of tangible experiences, including the impression of the dust entering their lungs; there is a sense of threat, of a latent but real danger, potentially lethal. The affective dimension is always present in the stories, as if to say that the territory and its inhabitants have experienced a co-evolution, and that separation is now impossible. Nonetheless familiarity coexists with a feeling of marginality and dismissal. The ensemble takes the form of a true dream archive; and it does not convey an escape from reality, on the contrary, it renders the current psychological condition of the community in all its complexity.



Figure 9: Micol Roubini, 2023, *La Montagna Magica*, still from video Italy, Courtesy the artist and Lo Schermo dell'arte. Project realized with the support of the Italian Council (2022)

An anthropologist involved in the project shared her thoughts. "In the dreams we gathered about the Amiantifera, the mine, lake, and mountain seem to weave a collective thread through individual nocturnal experiences," commented Arianna Cecconi. "This formidable, dangerous, and mysterious presence people encounter on a daily basis is manifested in the dream world in various forms, at times arousing shared fears." Cecconi highlights one dream narrative excerpt in particular: "I looked up, the once clear sky now consumed by a cloud. A cloud of dust seemed to descend from the mountain. So fine, the dust settled on my face, on my hands... Quickly, it turned dark. Pitch dark. I was afraid yet I continued to walk. A terrible silence enveloped me. I began to sing, to draw courage." We may find it striking that, despite the nine dreams revealing the complex, uncomfortable, and even painful nature of the place,

rarely do they adopt a tone of claim, resentment, or victimhood in relation to work-related social relations. Rather in these dreams, one feels there is a sense of alienation, isolation, bitterness; there is a subdued anguish due to the tension between the ostensibly favourable employment relations of the past, and the reality which turned out to be detrimental. Perhaps more significantly, it reflects a contrast between a sense of actively participating in the country's economic and social life that people felt in the past, compared with the uncertainty and lack of consistency people live with today. No intervention mitigated the effects of closing down the Amiantifera; no redemptive vision of the future exists. In this, Corio and Balangero might be emblematic of a broader modern-day malaise afflicting Italy as well as other countries.

A scene Roubini filmed from a completely different source conveys the poetic essence of the dream experience. One of the first recorded uses for asbestos was to weave fabric to protect objects, relics, and the remains of kings or priests from fire and the ravages of time. As the industrial revolution gained pace in the nineteenth century, documents show local entrepreneurs holding demos up and down Italy, in order to attract workers by ensuring guaranteed jobs, and extolling the virtues and benefits of asbestos for commercial purposes. Animals and sometimes humans were wrapped in asbestos cloth and taken over to large bonfires which were set ablaze. Despite the heat and flames, asbestos meant that these individuals were unharmed. In a scene inspired by these promotional activities, we see a young man in a white suit surrounded by flames and smoke: the boundary-pushing experience of the demonstration is thus symbolically performed in the Balangero landscape and imbued with a sense of ritual. Thus, the trajectories of Roubini's research take her to the history of asbestos perception.



Figure 10: Micòl Roubini, 2023, *La Montagna Magica*, still from video *Italy*, Courtesy the artist and Lo Schermo dell'arte. Project realized with the support of the Italian Council (2022)

One of the major protagonists of *The Magic Mountain* is undoubtedly the landscape; a landscape with one interpretation, that of a consumable resource, to be exploited industrially. Today this landscape has lost this connotation, and it is possible to discover its transformations, its layers of meaning and its historical and geological depths. A focused human interaction with the local community and the need for multidisciplinary exploration required years of research and many encounters with scholars from many fields. Undoubtedly, the most significant ongoing phenomenon in the area is the major cleanup operation taking place. The huge and severely contaminated area is being treated with new experimental methods in order to create a comprehensive ecosystem to replace all that has been lost over the last century. This process includes reforestation and begins with human intervention, planting out native and endemic plant species without necessarily knowing which will thrive, what their growth rates will be, or how they will react, only for inter-species interactions to start unfolding without human presence. The surrounding area, however, bears witness to the soil's primary and inalienable strength: a potent regenerator, it has reclaimed its fertility and, once again, is home to vegetation. In the four-projection video installation, Roubini documents the gradual rebirth of vegetation. We see the terraces of what once was a mountain, stepping down to a central void left by excavations, now filled with clear water inhabited by fish but toxic because of the sediment at its base.



Figure 11: Micol Roubini, 2023, *Shooting of La montagna magica*, Balangero, courtesy Micol Roubini.

The film portrays the forest in various seasons and developmental stages, its bushes, young and fully-grown trees, and paths for exploration. Reforestation workers always dress in white protective suits, a safeguard against the invisible yet ever-present risk of asbestos that lies beneath the surface of this entire area. Graphs, diagrams, and notes on continuous local monitoring are also displayed, together with images of structures and warehouses still standing, some empty, others filled with sealed bags of toxic materials waiting to be relocated. Next up are pictures of a type of lichen that appeared in the area, one of very few life forms

capable of metabolizing asbestos fibers. The lichen could potentially be a significant ally in the process of reclaiming the terrain, were it not for the fact that lichen timescales far exceed human ones, rendering their use impractical. The mere existence of such complex organisms bears remarkable witness to previously unseen cooperation, free from exploitation and instrumentalization, oriented towards a healthier environmental future. The artist's focus on this life form puts further emphasis on the varying timescales of natural phenomena, challenging our human penchant for viewing reality through the prism of our own lifespan—a duration so small compared to geological time—is an implicit call to reconsider human perspective as the yardstick for all things.



Figure 12: Micol Roubini, 2023, *La Montagna Magica*, still from video Italy, Courtesy the artist and Lo Schermo dell'arte. Project realized with the support of the Italian Council (2022).

Alongside images of the landscape and of the site's oneiric substrate, we see images of ongoing scientific research into asbestos. Fragments of rocks collected from the quarry are examined under a special microscope at the Giovanni Scansetti Interdepartmental Centre of the University of Turin, dedicated to studying asbestos and other respiratory-harmful fibers. Roubini pays tribute to the thorough, sensory dimension of field research and laboratory investigations, offering up an abundance of images related to scientific research, unmistakably underscoring the grave risks associated with asbestos and its extraction. The issue of risk unfolds subtly throughout *The Magic Mountain*, as it explores the inhabitants' diverse perceptions of the place, and their deep connections to this microcosm. The video installation very much reflects this, allowing different temporal and spatial scales to exist side-by-side. Images transition smoothly across different screens, eliciting visual and thematic connections, fostering dynamic, continuously evolving dialogue, triggering juxtapositions that interact with

one another, the space, and viewers. Roubini tangibly reveals the complex web of physical and psychological relationships, the social aspects, history, and myriad potential narratives that infuse this land. The dreams, which form such an important part of the project, channel memories and moods and present themselves as precious testimonies, revealing a common substratum of Balangero and Corio inhabitants. Sharing the dreams also represents the conquest of an expressive freedom regarding the area narration. In this lies the transformative potential of the long process. In Roubini's vision, the vitality of dreams can be seen as a way to challenge the sense of separation, failure, and passivity, as well as a way to claim one's own personal experience. In this sense, I think we can say that art, and this project in particular, has a potential for healing.



Figure 13: Micol Roubini, 2023, *La Montagna Magica*, still from video Italy, Courtesy the artist and Lo Schermo dell'arte. Project realized with the support of the Italian Council (2022).

The Magic Mountain may be framed within a wider context of modern-day political, social, and economic history characterized by an extractivist mindset, extreme environmental exploitation, and aggressive, indifferent infrastructure development. That approach stimulated production but was heedless of any repercussions, whether it be landgrabs or significant health impacts. Addressing the tension between rights and resources in Corio and Balangero, Roubini raises fundamental questions. Questions about what will be selected to survive, and whether it's possible to restore livability and a future to an area whose prospects, with the mine's closure, were suddenly closed down. The plight of this area mirrors many others that, until recently, were productive and competitive but are today in a state of vulnerability, needful of new strategies of intervention and, before that, new ways of understanding. The ability of art to interpret reality might make a significant contribution to this process. Thus,

due to the structure of the installation, Roubini's interpretation of the Balangero and Corio situation effectively brought out the numerous components of the story by facilitating the expression of a social group through dreams. Some of those components were: labour, nature, infrastructures, with the mine infrastructure replaced by that necessary for a reclamation process that will bring reparation, but at the very high price of a long-term exclusion of the inhabitants from their territory. The project also emerges as paradigmatic with respect to the phenomenon of extractivism on a planetary scale and its consequences and implications on lands and living beings.

On a personal level, supporting Roubini in her four years of work with the Corio and Balangero inhabitants has been a paradigmatic experience of shared exploration and aesthetic practice. Conveying the project in exhibitions or in other forms to specialists and non-specialists is now going to be another way of sharing the project's contents, of promoting a cultural sharing, of creating bridges and interfaces. The aspiration is that people will begin to understand that curating as a long-term and organic practice can contribute to civic and social life by fostering possible ways of inhabiting the earth based on interconnectedness. We hope that supporting the circulation of art and facilitating its integration into people's lives may help to connect them with each other and with the context, thereby promoting a sense of openness and of psychic, cultural, civic, and social co-belonging in society. This could be a modest contribution to society through curatorial activity done with society at heart.

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16mm film transferred to 2K, Dolby, 60 minutes The project was supported by Italian Council program (2022), promoted by the Directorate-General for Contemporary Creativity within the Italian Ministry of Culture.

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La Montagna Magica is a collaborative project made possible through close collaboration with the residents of Corio, Balangero, and the surrounding territories of the former mine.

About the Author

Gabi Scardi investigates art and the public sphere and contemporary collaborative methodologies. She collaborates internationally with museums and institutions, curating solo shows, group exhibitions. Scardi has curated several public projects: the restoration of Alberto Burri's *Teatro Continuo*, Parco Sempione, Milan. She has been the artistic director of *nctm e l'arte* project since 2011 and became co-director of *Animot* review in 2020. Scardi is a member of EoC - Ecologie of Care, of CCW - Cultural Welfare Center, and of NAHR - Nature, Art & Habitat Residency. She is director of the course in Socially Engaged Art, at Accademia Unidee, Biella, and teaches Contemporary Art at Academy of Fine Arts, Verona, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan. In addition, she contributes reviews and features to publications and exhibition catalogues. Among her publications: Alberto Burri's *Teatro Continuo*, ed. Corraini, Mantova 2015; *Paesaggio con figura: Arte, sfera pubblica, trasformazione sociale*, ed. Allemandi, Torino 2011.

About the Artist

Micol Roubini is an artist and filmmaker. Her work explores the relation between memory and oral traditions, the anthropization of marginalized areas, internal migrations, and the transitional and conflicting elements engendered by the passage of time. She primarily employs video, sound, and writing in her practice. Her work was exhibited at Casa Testori, Italia/Italy (2021); *Biruchiy* contemporary art project, Ucraina/Ukraine (2016); Hotel Charleroi, Belgium (2013); Scottish Sculpture Workshop, United Kingdom (2013); Novia University of Applied Sciences, Finland (2011). She has participated in video festivals at Villa Medici, Rome (2021); Pavilion, Poznań (2021); Light Cone, Paris (2017) and *Stills – Centre*

for Photography, Edinburgh (2012). In 2019, her first feature film *La stradaper le montagne* was presented in competition at the 41st edition of the Cinéma du Réel Festival and was subsequently screened at various other European festivals including the Trieste Film Festival, where it won the Corso Salani Award. She co-founded with Davide Maldi L'Altauro, a production company dedicated to developing works of art, cinema, and indie documentaries. Additionally, she works as an author and screenwriter for cinematic projects.

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