

Art as Social Infrastructure: Curating Practices Through the Visible Project

Carolina Lio Rodrigues, Istituto Marangoni London, United Kingdom

The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This practice-based paper considers how curatorial work may operate as social infrastructure through the case of Visible, an international platform for socially engaged art. Drawing on the author's position as a co-curator of Visible since 2020, the paper argues that the curatorial task in socially engaged practices also involves creating the economic, relational, discursive and temporal conditions through which situated practices can continue on their own terms. The argument brings Visible's transition from an award model to Situated Fellowships into dialogue with debates on participatory art, institutional critique, care and the curatorial. It proposes that infrastructural curating should be understood as a practice of accompaniment: providing resources, research, publishing, translation and long-term relation while remaining alert to unequal power, the pressures of representation and the risk that institutions convert community knowledge into symbolic capital. The paper discusses the fellowship model alongside projects including Waral Prakalp, Mujeres Muralistas Soi Noma, GOODLand and CLIMAVORE. Rather than claiming that art solves social problems, it identifies how particular curatorial arrangements can help sustain spaces of collective knowledge, ecological attention and political imagination. The paper concludes that socially engaged practices require forms of institutional support that value duration, reciprocity and contextual autonomy.

Keywords: socially engaged art, curating, social infrastructure, Visible project

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

While socially engaged art has historically been distinguished from autonomous, object-based models through its emphasis on participation, dialogue and processes of collaboration (Bishop, 2006; Bourriaud, 1998; Kester, 2004; Lacy, 1995), recent debate has shifted the focus from these interpersonal exchanges toward the infrastructural and epistemic conditions that sustain them (Angelotti et al., 2024; Hui, 2021; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Its materials may include social relations, local knowledge, pedagogy, organising, public assembly, ecological repair or forms of commoning. Such practices can be presented in galleries and museums, but they cannot be adequately understood through display alone. They often unfold over extended periods (Jackson, 2011; Kester, 2011), depend on trust and local knowledge (Angelotti et al., 2024), and draw their meaning from relations with particular communities, territories, and political conditions (Kester, 2011). This creates a corresponding challenge for curating. If a project's significance resides partly in the conditions it sustains, what does it mean to curate it without reducing those conditions to a temporary event or an institutional image?

This paper approaches this question through Visible, an international platform initiated in 2010 by Cittadellarte–Fondazione Pistoletto and Fondazione Zegna to support socially engaged artistic practices. Since 2020, the author has worked with Visible as a co-curator (working alongside the project's original curators, Matteo Lucchetti and Judith Wielander) across research, editorial work, public programming, and fellowship processes. The paper therefore offers neither a neutral account of the platform nor an impact evaluation. It is a practice-based reflection that treats proximity as a methodological condition requiring reflexivity. It asks how curatorial work may function as support, accompaniment and care rather than solely as selection, mediation and display.

The central claim is that Visible can be understood as a curatorial infrastructure. By this, the paper does not mean that art becomes a substitute for public services, nor that social value is reducible to measurable outcomes. Instead, art as social infrastructure names the capacity of artistic and curatorial practices to create and sustain conditions in which relations, forms of knowledge and collective imaginaries can circulate. The question consequently shifts from “How is this work shown?” to “What enables this practice to continue; whose knowledge is recognised; and how are resources, risks and responsibilities distributed?” This shift is particularly important for practices working with Indigenous, ecological and community-based knowledge, where visibility can be enabling but can also be extractive.

Method and Positionality

The paper combines practice-based reflection with a selective reading of literature on participatory art, institutional critique and the curatorial. Practice-based research is appropriate here because the object of analysis is not a finished exhibition but a set of ongoing organisational decisions, treating these creative and administrative processes as legitimate sites of critical inquiry (Sullivan, 2010). The author's experience gives access to the discussions and curatorial processes that shape Visible, but it does not offer an objective viewpoint. It therefore requires an explicit account of positionality.

This proximity is not treated as a limitation to be eliminated. Instead, it follows the principles of reflexivity, treating the researcher's position not as a bias to be removed but as a methodological tool (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009), which allows posing practical questions that abstractions about participation or care can often conceal. These include who determines

the terms of collaboration, how funding is made useful to a project rather than to an institutional narrative, what can be translated for wider publics without being simplified, and when a curator should step back.

Lastly, the analysis does not claim to speak for the collectives discussed. The examples are used to examine the kinds of support relation that Visible seeks to establish, based on publicly presented project information and the author's curatorial experience.

From Participation to Infrastructural Curating

Discourse on participatory and socially engaged art has productively centred dialogue, collaboration, and collective authorship, most notably in Kester's (2004, 2011) emphasis on sustained exchange, listening, and co-produced knowledge. These accounts highlight the necessity of temporal duration, processes that resist simple objectification, and a shift in curatorial practice toward the active construction of supportive conditions (Lind, 2011; von Bismarck et al., 2012). Such an approach demands critical attention to the distribution of agency, risk, and the capacity for refusal or withdrawal. Ultimately, curating as infrastructure functions as more than a secondary support; it is a critical inquiry into the arrangements that render meaningful autonomy and accountability possible.

The term "social infrastructure" popularised by Eric Klinenberg and expanded upon by media theorist Shannon Mattern (2021) sharpens this account. While "infrastructure" is often reductively associated with the built environment in urban studies, Mattern defines it as a site of ongoing maintenance; a realm of hidden labour, stewardship, and social relations that keeps systems functioning. This shift is essential for curatorial practice, as it allows us to adapt the term to describe the relational systems of support in art: the material, discursive, and temporal arrangements that enable practices to continue, evolve, and sustain themselves. It points to the material and relational systems that enable people to meet, learn, and act together. Without denying that institutional frameworks are necessary, "infrastructure" can also manifest as a powerful form of non-institutional support that exists outside of state or corporate power; a radical mode of living, studying, and organising that exists within an institution but against its logic, conceptualised by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) as the "undercommons".

Applied to art, the term should not be romanticised. Art cannot remedy structural inequalities by itself, and cultural institutions remain implicated in the political economies that shape them. Nevertheless, artistic projects can create spaces in which other social relations and forms of attention become possible. Coccia (2024) frames art as a mode of making capable of inventing new forms of life. Rancière (2004) similarly understands aesthetics as bound to the distribution of the sensible: the ordering of what can be seen, heard and thought. Together, these perspectives clarify that art's social significance may lie not in delivering an instrumental solution but in reorganising relations between knowledge, perception and collective possibility. This is important for socially engaged practice because its work often concerns more than the representation of a community or issue. It can create situations in which different forms of knowledge, experience and collective agency enter into relation. In this sense, the artistic and curatorial task is not to give voice on behalf of others, but to help establish conditions in which existing voices, knowledges and claims can be recognised without being assimilated into institutional categories.

Limits, Risks and Responsibilities

However, while these dialogical approaches offer new possibilities, they must also critically contend with the uneven conditions under which dialogue takes place. Differences in institutional authority, cultural capital, funding and mobility do not disappear when participants are invited into a project, and systemic power imbalances, such as institutional control over narrative, can render visibility extractive (Bishop, 2006; Fraser, 2005). The language of care can itself be easily institutionalised. Care should not become a soft vocabulary that leaves decision-making power untouched. Nor should it obscure the fact that curators and institutions control budgets, selection processes and the terms on which projects are circulated (Bishop, 2006; Fraser, 2005). A critical approach must retain attention to consent, refusal, attribution and redistribution. It must also be prepared to recognise that an institution may be unable to offer the right conditions for a given project.

The risk of extractive representation is especially acute when a project is rooted in a community, territory or knowledge system that has historically been defined and labelled through external categories. The issue is not only who is pictured, but whose modes of communication, pedagogy and knowledge are granted legitimacy. Curatorial translation should therefore be reciprocal and revisable: it should ask what a project wishes to make public, what should remain local or private, and how the benefits of circulation are distributed (Canclini, 2024; Kester, 2011).

A further limit concerns evaluation. Socially engaged projects are frequently required to demonstrate impact in ways that privilege short-term indicators. Such measures may be necessary for accountability, but they can be inadequate for relations that unfold gradually or produce effects that cannot be isolated (Bishop, 2006; Kester, 2011). The alternative is not to abandon assessment, but to develop forms of evaluation that attend to process, context and the priorities articulated by participants. Curatorial institutions should be accountable for the infrastructures they create: the duration and flexibility of funding, the ownership of documentation, the conditions of public representation and the ways relationships continue after a programme ends.

Four Curatorial Functions of Visible

The preceding discussion establishes that institutional support is not neutral: it shapes whose work is recognised, how it is represented, and which forms of knowledge are made to circulate. Visible is relevant here not because it resolves these tensions, but because it offers a concrete institutional arrangement through which they can be addressed. Its curatorial model is organised through four connected functions: support, research, publishing, and the cultivation of relations. Each concerns a different part of the conditions through which a situated practice can continue without being reduced to an institutional story or a temporary public event.

First, Visible acts as a support structure. The question is not only whether resources are provided, but whether they can be directed towards priorities defined by a practice and its context. This may include time, materials, research, collaboration or other forms of continuity that are difficult to accommodate within exhibition-led programming. Second, Visible works as a research platform. Through commissioned texts, conversations, and public reflection, it helps develop language for socially engaged art that attends to its artistic, political, and situated dimensions, rather than treating it solely as activism, social work, or illustrative content. Third, publishing as a curatorial activity can hold process, conflict, history and methodology in ways

that a label, press release or short exhibition encounter cannot. It can create an archive and enable circulation, while retaining a practice's complexity. Fourth, Visible cultivates relations among artists, collectives, writers, curators, institutions, funders and publics. The value of this network is not international visibility as an end in itself, but the possibility of reciprocal exchange: making connections across geographies without severing a practice from the community, territory or knowledge system that gives it meaning. These functions are interdependent. Research can clarify the terms through which a practice is understood; publishing can preserve and share its history; relations can return attention and resources to it; and support can be adjusted through sustained dialogue rather than delivered as a one-off transaction.

Crucially, this description should not be read as a claim that Visible has resolved the unequal relations that shape socially engaged art. The same functions can reproduce institutional authority if funding remains conditional, if research speaks over practitioners, if publishing fixes a project into an authorised narrative, or if international circulation becomes more valuable to the platform than to the practices involved. Visible is therefore considered here as a critically situated experiment open to revision rather than a finished model.

From Award to Situated Fellowships

Visible's development from the Visible Award (2011–2019) to the Visible Situated Fellowships from 2022 provides an especially helpful and concrete site of reflection. The award generated recognition and public discussion through temporary parliaments and juries. The later fellowship model changes the emphasis from awarding an already legible project to providing context-specific support for practices that require time, trust, collaboration and local knowledge. The change responds to a temporal mismatch: socially engaged work may take years to develop, while art institutions often operate through short exhibitions, fixed funding cycles and changing leadership.

The Situated Fellowships are designed around projects rooted in particular communities and responding to social or ecological urgencies. Their logic is not simply to fund an outcome. Instead, support is intended to be useful to a project's own pace and priorities through resources, listening, consent, careful representation and sustained relation. This is a demanding proposition. It requires the institution to resist treating funding as a transaction through which it acquires a story, an image or a claim to social relevance. It also requires recognising that the platform's international circulation can be valuable only if it does not detach projects from the social and territorial conditions that give them meaning.

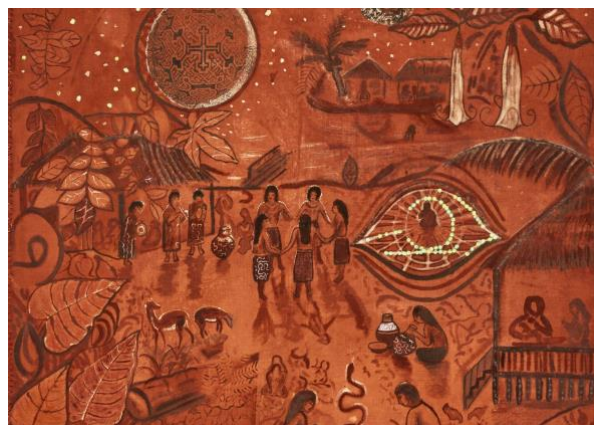
Visible therefore offers a practical response to the preceding concerns: it shifts curatorial attention from recognition alone towards the conditions that enable a practice to continue with contextual autonomy. The following fellowship projects illustrate the practical implications of this model, showing how curatorial support can be meaningfully calibrated to the specific requirements of community-embedded practices.

Figure 1
Waghoba—The Guardian



Note. Waral Prkalp, installation work-in progress at Spore Initiative (2024–2025). Courtesy of the artists, Visible and Spore Initiative.

Figure 2
Community Help



Note. Edelmira Mori (2021). Stained with soft mahogany bark with natural dyes and embroidered on fabric; 140 × 160 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Visible.

Waral Prkalp

Waral Prkalp (Figure 1), led by Mayur and Tushar Vayeda in the Warli community of Maharashtra, India, connects forest protection, ecological regeneration, cultural heritage and artistic practice (Visible, 2025c). Its fellowship support has contributed to the development of a permanent community hub, seed library and nursery. The relevance of this example is not that it proves art's capacity to solve ecological crisis. Rather, it shows how a curatorial platform can support a project whose work already combines intergenerational learning, storytelling and the preservation of Indigenous ecological knowledge. The central question is whether the platform's resources strengthen the project's own infrastructure rather than redirecting it towards a more institutionally convenient form.

Mujeres Muralistas Soi Noma

Mujeres Muralistas Soi Noma (Figure 2), a collective of Shipibo-Konibo women artisans working between Lima and Pucallpa, offers a related case (Visible, 2025b). Through painting, embroidery, singing and design, the collective sustains Kené as a visual language connected to worldview, women's labour, community care and the defence of the Amazon rainforest. Here, care must include material conditions: funding for the continuation of practice and the purchase of materials can be as significant as public exposure. It must also include representational caution. The collective's work cannot be reduced to an image of Indigeneity available for institutional display. An infrastructural curatorial relation needs to make space for the collective's own forms of authorship, language and decision-making.

GOODLand

GOODLand (Figure 3), founded by Martha Atienza on Bantayan Island in the Philippines, brings together fisherpeople, farmers, communities, and institutions around coastal rights, ecological protection, and local resilience (Visible, 2025a). The project treats the seabed as an underwater forest requiring protection and combines research, training, advocacy and locally held environmental knowledge. It exemplifies how artistic practice may create or reinforce community infrastructure without being identical to social service provision. The work's

artistic dimension lies partly in the relations and imaginaries it convenes; thus its value cannot be captured by an exhibitionary encounter alone.

CLIMAVORE

CLIMAVORE (Figure 4), the long-term project of Cooking Sections of which the phase on Skye and Raasay is arguably the most well-known, similarly brings food systems, coastal ecology and public gathering into relation (Visible, 2023a). Tsing (2024) reads the project's tidal table as a situation in which participants are invited to live with tides and ecological interdependence rather than treat coastal waters as zones of industrial extraction. The project's public formats, including the 2023 CLIMAVORE Assembly (Visible, 2023b) in Rome, show how assembly can evolve from a temporary event into a curatorial and democratic tool. The task is to gather diverse expertise while avoiding the instrumentalisation of local knowledge for institutional theatre.

Figure 3

Adlaw sa mga Mananagat (Fisherfolks Day 2022)



Note. Martha Atienza (2022). Video still. Courtesy of the artist and Visible.

Figure 4

CLIMAVORE: On Tidal Zones



Note. Cooking Sections (2017). Installation view, Isle of Skye, Scotland. Courtesy of the artists and Visible.

Across these examples, the point is not to establish a uniform model as the needs for each project are substantially unique. Therefore, infrastructural curating must be context-specific because necessities, risks and forms of accountability differ. What they share is a requirement for duration. Trust, shared language and situated knowledge cannot be produced on demand for an exhibition deadline. The fellowship model therefore makes a normative claim about time: institutions that seek to work with socially engaged practices should adapt their support structures to the temporalities of the practices, not require practices to adapt to the temporalities of institutional programming.

Finally, the examples suggest that successful adaptation is relational rather than programmatic: it depends on whether resources can be directed towards locally defined priorities; whether institutions remain responsive after the initial moment of selection; and whether networks return tangible value, attention and learning to the contexts from which projects emerge. The critical measure is thus not how widely a project travels, but whether the conditions of its circulation strengthen or weaken its contextual autonomy. This shifts curating from a model of delivery towards an ongoing practice of listening, adjustment and reciprocal responsibility.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that socially engaged art should be understood through its relational, durational and situated dimensions. Its significance may lie less in a discrete object or public event than in the conditions through which knowledge, collective capacity and political imagination can be sustained. Curating such practices therefore cannot be limited to selection, interpretation or display. It involves the material and ethical work of resourcing time, supporting research, enabling careful translation and maintaining relationships beyond the moment of exhibition.

The argument is not that art can solve social or ecological problems, nor that institutions can simply declare themselves caring and thereby overcome the inequalities of cultural production. Visible is valuable as a critically qualified case because its Situated Fellowships attempt to respond to these tensions through context-specific support, research, publishing and long-term relation. The platform's significance lies not in offering a finished model, but in making its institutional methods answerable to questions of consent, agency, redistribution and duration.

The challenge for institutional decision-makers is clear: if they seek to support socially engaged practice responsibly, they must treat duration, flexibility and contextual accountability as core curatorial commitments rather than as optional additions to a programme. This means funding time as well as outcomes; allowing projects to define what support is useful; ensuring that representation and authorship remain open to revision; and judging success not only by reach or visibility, but by whether institutional involvement strengthens a practice's capacity to continue on its own terms. Curating as social infrastructure is ultimately a commitment to build and maintain the conditions in which situated artistic practices can exercise autonomy, sustain relations and make other social and political futures imaginable.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges Istituto Marangoni London and Professor Kirsten Scott, Head of Research, for the support in enabling participation in the 14th European Conference on Arts & Humanities (ECAH2026). The author also thanks Matteo Lucchetti, Judith Wielander, Cittadellarte–Fondazione Pistoletto, Fondazione Zegna and Zegna for supporting the wider context in which this practice-based research developed, and the artists, collectives and collaborators whose work has informed this reflection.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author used OpenAI's Codex as an AI-assisted writing tool to help transform the transcript from the conference presentation into a manuscript draft, organising material, and improving clarity and structure. The author remains responsible for reviewing the draft, verifying references and factual claims, and determining the final text, arguments, and conclusions.

References

- Alvesson, M., & Sköldbberg, K. (2009). *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research*. Sage.
- Angelotti, M., Lucchetti, M., & Wielander, J. (Eds.). (2024). *Visible: Art as policies for care: Socially engaged art (2010–ongoing)*. NERO.
- Bishop, C. (2006). The social turn: Collaboration and its discontents. *Artforum*, 44(6), 178–183.
- Bourriaud, N. (1998). *Relational aesthetics*. Les Presses du réel.
- Canclini, N. G. (2024). Tequiografías: Reimagining interculturality. In M. Angelotti, M. Lucchetti, & J. Wielander (Eds.), *Visible: Art as policies for care: Socially engaged art (2010–ongoing)* (pp. 81–84). NERO.
- Coccia, E. (2024). Epilogue. In M. Angelotti, M. Lucchetti, & J. Wielander (Eds.), *Visible: Art as policies for care: Socially engaged art (2010–ongoing)* (pp. 310–319). NERO.
- Fraser, A. (2005). From the critique of institutions to an institution of critique. *Artforum*, 44(1), 278–283.
- Harney, S., & Moten, F. (2013). *The undercommons: Fugitive planning and black study*. Minor Compositions.
- Hui, Y. (2021). *Art and cosmotechnics*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Jackson, S. (2011). *Social works: Performing art, supporting publics*. Routledge.
- Kester, G. H. (2004). *Conversation pieces: Community and communication in modern art*. University of California Press.
- Kester, G. H. (2011). *The one and the many: Contemporary collaborative art in a global context*. Duke University Press.
- Lacy, S. (1995). *Mapping the terrain: New genre public art*. Bay Press.
- Lind, M. (2011). *Selected Maria Lind writing*. Sternberg Press.
- Mattern, S. (2021). *A city is not a computer: Other urban intelligences*. Princeton University Press.
- Phillips, A. (2020). *Democracy and dramaturgy: Modern justice and socially engaged artistic practices* [Seminar]. Konstfack.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjknfarcIc4>
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017). *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*. University of Minnesota Press.

- Rancière, J. (2004). *The politics of aesthetics: The distribution of the sensible*. Continuum.
- Sullivan, G. (2010). *Art practice as research: Inquiry in visual arts*. Sage Publications.
- Tsing, A. L. (2024). CLIMAVORE: On tidal zones. In M. Angelotti, M. Lucchetti, & J. Wielander (Eds.), *Visible: Art as policies for care: Socially engaged art (2010–ongoing)* (pp. 244–246). NERO.
- Visible. (2023a). *CLIMAVORE*. <https://www.visibleproject.org/fellowship/climavore/>
- Visible. (2023b). *Climavore Assembly*. <https://www.visibleproject.org/parliament/climavore-assembly-in-rome/>
- Visible. (2025a). *GOODLand*. <https://www.visibleproject.org/fellowship/goodland/>
- Visible. (2025b). *Mujeres Muralistas Soi Noma*. <https://www.visibleproject.org/fellowship/shinan-imabo/>
- Visible. (2025c). *Waral Prakaalp*. <https://www.visibleproject.org/fellowship/waral-prakaalp/>
- von Bismarck, B., Schaffaff, J., & Weski, T. (Eds.). (2012). *Cultures of the curatorial*. Sternberg Press.