

## Space Invaders by Valentina Rojas Loa

In April 2014, the artist Dan Halter landed in Mirafiori on the outskirts of the city of Turin. This traveller brought with him the experience of very distant places, cultures and parts of the world to what was used to be called Turin's ›Bronx‹. For decades the otherwise bourgeois and industrial north-Italian city considered the Mirafiori district to be a synonym for ›danger and crime‹ and looked down on it as an antithesis of the ›urban‹.

### Mirafiori soil

From the 1940s through the 1970s, thousands of people arrived in Mirafiori in search of work at the FIAT factory plant located in this very district. These immigrant workers first came from the Piemonte region, but soon poured in by growing numbers from the most distant corners of southern Italy. Arriving in Mirafiori they found themselves faced with a total lack of housing and urban infrastructure, which is why they started building their homes with their own hands. It was not until the 1960s that the local authorities met their demands by constructing low-cost public housing, and by providing basic services such as water and electricity.

Right from the beginning – and long before urban gardening became fashionable in cities such as Paris, London or New York – the immigrants of Mirafiori improvised sophisticated vegetable gardens in order to produce their own basic food and to preserve some aspects of their rural identity. Mirafiori became a melting pot of distinct geographical and cultural origins and dialects, in part, precisely because of the common rural origin of most of its newcomers. It is because of this shared transitory rural-urban heritage that northern Italians scornfully called these migrant workers ›terroni‹ (›earthy‹).

Years later, around 2000, Turin's City Council undertook a major programme of urban renewal of the district of Mirafiori, including the reconstruction and management of the vegetable gardens. Such programme, which in part was also implemented by local citizens associations, produced remarkable results in terms of security and a sense of belonging. However, in relation to the gardens, the Council failed to acknowledge the complexity of the social – and natural – fabric that, throughout decades, had grown and flourished on site. Instead, they completely demolished most of the old gardens in order to rebuild them anew, and failed to encourage inhabitants to participate in the reconstruction process. As consequence, as the agronomist and local activist Marco Bottignole recalls, the authorities destroyed all traces of the rich network of public spaces that formerly existed, and where people used to meet.

Once the gardens were turned over, the Council opened a restrictive call to Mirafiori's low-income pensioners to apply for new allotments. Due to these limitations in the application process, the group of local garden users today consists of a homogenous population in terms of social background and age, and their energy and resources to keep the gardens productive has withered (at this point, 40 per cent of the gardens have been left to decay). There is also not much sense of community among the current gardeners.

At the same time, approximately 200 of the original gardens were preserved in their state prior to the renovation. These so-called, ›spontaneous gardens‹ are tolerated by the local authority, yet due to their ambiguous legal condition they are isolated from the ›official‹ gardens and from the infrastructure that connects the area with the city. High fences block the view and access is rough and disrupted. Nevertheless – or, rather, because of this secluded location – these gardens are inhabited by yet another group of people who have made the site their well-organised camp settlement.

Within this complex constellation of rural and urban, home and foreign affairs, Istituto Wesen, an Italian NGO supporting local development, citizen participation and cultural heritage preservation for more than 20 years, prepared the ground for artist Dan Halter's 9UB Turin residency.

### **Growing the project**

When Dan arrived in Mirafiori, he spent his first weeks trying to understand the social and natural context of the place. Given his long experience of working on issues of migration, (born in Zimbabwe, brought up by Swiss parents and living in South Africa, he himself has a history of geographical and cultural displacement), Dan developed a project where gardening and migration could be brought together: »My idea was to use the plants to tell the story of migration. The plants themselves have an inbuilt message depending on what kind of plants they are, and where they come from. The way they have moved around the world is political. A lot of plants that are considered to be ›Italian‹ come from somewhere else, such as tomatoes, basil or corn.«

Dan's first idea was to use flowers to compose a planted sculpture of the image of the space invader, a metaphor he has used in his artistic production before, drawing on »its simple iconography and playful representation of aliens/ immigrants«. However, he soon realised that in Mirafiori flowers are perceived as luxury items. He therefore decided to work with useful plants such as herbs and vegetables that locals grow in their gardens. With the help of Marco Bottignole, the local agronomist who also acted as 9UB's integrated reporter, ›gate-opener‹ and interpreter at Dan's side, he spoke to the Mirafiori gardeners in order to find out what they were interested in growing. In this sense, Dan's artwork started with learning: learning which plants to choose that would grow fast and well during the Spring - Summer season of his residency, and that could easily be transplanted in order to ›draw‹ with them and, last but not least, learning which plants offered an interesting colour palette for his extraterrestrial invasion.

The project then unfolded with the sowing and cultivating of the plants on the grounds of the Casa nel Parco, the community centre of Colonetti Park and project space for the residency. Once the plants had grown to a good size, Dan assembled a space invader image by using the trays with their different coloured plants to represent pixels. On June 14<sup>th</sup> a public event was celebrated to mark the end of the project.

A documentary video of the growing and performing of the living sculpture was shown along with a presentation of the art project within the context of

Nine Urban Biotopes. At the end of the day, the plants were given away as gifts to the visitors and neighbours of Mirafiori.

### **Working with plants and people**

The notion of fabricating things is central to Dan's artistic practice. He repeatedly works with different materials and is very keen on exploring their intrinsic characteristics in order to shape the art piece both in its physical and symbolic expression. However, he had never used living material before. Now, the project Dan envisioned meant that he had to incorporate into his practice working with living plants that needed to be nurtured and looked after continuously. »It has been nice to create some- thing that grows from something very little ... but it has been quite an effort to keep those plants alive!« Dan explained the emotional relationship he developed with his artwork and its process of growth. And with regard to the scale of his living sculpture, he experienced first hand why sustaining and managing »productive uncertainty« is intrinsic to what in experimental architecture is called »botanic construction«.

In addition to working with plants, Dan had to incorporate the local gardeners as active stakeholders in the delivery of the project. Working with others was a new experience for Dan. By joining the 9UB project framework, he expanded his practice to include working in this way. Both the novelty of making something together with others, and the social context of the Mirafiori biotope made the process particularly challenging. Most of the gardeners belonged to a different generation, and came from a different cultural and social background. They did not have much interest in what gardening had to do with art and why what they were doing was supposed to be art in the first place. Moreover, language issues troubled their conversations. Dan did not speak Italian and, according to Marco, the gardeners spoke in dialects or with strong accents that even for a native speaker were difficult to follow.

The support offered by Marco along with Silvia Magino and Marta Colangelo from Istituto Wesen proved crucial to building a bridge between the artist and the local inhabitants. According to Silvia, most of the gardeners were reluctant to participate in this or any other art project. Hence engaging them in a discussion about what Dan was trying to do with something as concrete and familiar to them as growing plants was as challenging as the new outlooks and perspectives that they gained were rewarding. During the process, some of the gardeners, such as Marcello Allotta, acknowledged that the effort and craft they put into their allotments, as well as the fact that they use their gardens as a means of self-expression, was indeed, their own way of making art. Dan, too, found his first encounter with participative art work very enriching: »The positive side of working with people is that I have been able to do much more than I would have been able to do by myself. It is a very collaborative and collective work: the ideas came from the workshop, the words from the people, and the plants from the people and Marco. The difficult thing, however, was that I don't normally ask for permission to do what I do, and here I had to ask for permission for everything we did, even to cut the grass and hang posters.«

## Invaders to space invaders

Asking for permission might have been bothersome, but it was nevertheless one of the minor issues that were at stake during the residency. The ›real‹ challenge was the invitation that Dan extended to a group of Roma children to participate in the project – clashing with the request of the community centre Casa nel Parco to exclude them.

The Roma children interested in Dan's work belong to five families that came from Bosnia as political refugees and who live in campers on the edges of Colonetti Park, right next to where the community centre is located. They live isolated from another Roma camp nearby who refused to integrate them in the settlement because they belonged to a different family branch. When Dan realised the kids were his neighbours, he invited them to help sow the seeds in trays and then later, when they had grown into plants, to assemble the pixel image of his living sculpture using the trays. As a matter of fact, he quickly recognised that engaging with these children was essential to him and his work: » The way Roma people are treated here was an eye opener for me. They are actually banned from here. Most of the work was made with the help of the Roma children. Dealing with the real immigrants of Mirafiori, the real outcasts, was the point for me. The migrants from southern Italy are integrated. Some of them have even become snobs, if you like, but with the Roma the efforts to integrate them have failed.« Silvia from Instituto Wesen confirmed his observations. She described the situation as »history repeating«, because »Most of the families from Mirafiori treat them [the Roma settlers] like they themselves were treated back in the 1950s.«

However, the picture is of course much more complicated. The Roma are not simply the ›new victims‹ and the inhabitants of Mirafiori and the staff of the community centre the new ›culprits‹ unable to learn from their own history and experience, or refusing to grant the present day immigrants the same rights that they fought for on arrival (and which they now hold). According to Paola Monasterolo, director of Casa nel Parco, past efforts to integrate the Roma into the community centre were undertaken but failed. Paola claims that when the Roma people were invited to the community centre » They took over the facilities, in particular the toilets, and thus other people from the area were not very keen on having them in the centre.« In addition to that, there have been constant incidents of theft, possibly perpetrated by the Roma kids, but often done quite openly by them as direct provocation.

Acknowledging these different points of view, we might ask ourselves about the more concrete circumstances that shaped this and previous encounters between the Roma and community centre staff. Perhaps building trust was not given enough time to succeed, or perhaps there was not a developed enough common language with which to reach an agreement. Moreover, the notion of integration itself needs to be reviewed. The will and need to integrate –either in the micro-cosmos of the community centre or in the larger city of Turin and Italian society– is likely to be contested both by the ›new‹ and the ›old‹ residents. Beyond being a buzzword to solve the problems that relate to

migration, what does integration really mean? And on what grounds is it possible to achieve?

The interesting point here is that an event that was apparently only tangential to the project was to become its very kernel: the Roma children were the space invaders of the Space Invaders project. And their situation as the new migrants on the edge of the city was not perceived by the gardeners as having anything in common with the experience of earlier generations of migrants to Mirafiori. Tackling problematic issues when they belong to the past and have been ›solved‹ is always safer than embracing a current situation with all the contradictions and complexities it entails. On the surface, the outcome of Dan's residency concealed the tensions among host, formal and informal participants. In between the lines, however, he allowed the situation to claim its space: at the end of his documentary video, he uses the pixels of the space invader image to write the Romani expression ›Hokkani Boro‹, which translates as ›the great trick‹ and is used to describe a person who has gained a client's trust in order to get hold of his money.

## **Conclusion**

On the rainy evening of the project's final presentation, the neighbours, the local authorities and the members of Istituto Wesen kept mentioning that the most important outcome of Dan Halter's artistic residency for the community of Mirafiori was that they became part of an inter- national network. From being considered the antithesis of the urban, this district became a point of reference for an international discussion on the construction of sustainable urban futures around the globe. This, of course, provided encouragement for building a sense of pride among the local people that, for more than a decade, have been striving to combat the ›fate‹ of being the perilous and unwanted peripheral daughters of Turin. Moreover, it invited the rest of the inhabitants of Turin – who hitherto had been afraid of setting a foot into the area–to start including the supposedly scary district of Mirafiori both physically and mentally as a worthwhile part of the city. Beyond the importance of this sense of pride and transformed urban imaginary, the relevance of Space Invader lies in the fact that it succeeded in creating a metaphor of the his- tory of migration of Mirafiori, 60 years ago and today. By using endemic and foreign plants for his living sculpture, ephemeral and interrelated nature of migration and settlement. Given the continuous and world-wide movement of both plants and people since the beginning of history, when do we start considering a plant or a person to be an ›original‹ from one place instead of another? How and when do we decide that a plant has ›the right to stay‹ even if it is an invasive specimen that destroys other ›endemic‹ plants? The South African Mesembryanthemum used by Dan in another installation he made in Turin illustrates this because today it is highly coveted in Italian gardens due to its ornamental value.

As Dan mentioned before, some of the most typical ingredients of Italian cuisine – or any other cuisine when traced back in history came from different corners of the planet centuries ago. The ›aboriginal‹ human population is also originally constituted of nomads who migrated around the world looking for a

suitable place to live. Countries such as the United States are very proud of their migrant origins (although not very welcoming to their present migrants). The same is true with the Roma population both in the micro-cosmos of Mirafiori and on the European continent: Where do they belong? What belongs to them? Are they not part of a pan-European culture? Does a nomadic population have the right to roam a territory that crosses national borders? Who decides whether they are entitled to stay and under what conditions? Dan Halter's 9UB residency in Turin revealed that a project about something as innocent and benign as gardening can address some of the most pressing issues of our human condition.