Civic Arts for the Democratic Odyssey

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Definition and Importance of Civic Arts

Civic arts, as an emerging cluster of participatory facilitation practices for citizen deliberation, encompass a variety of artistic and cultural tools aimed at actively involving citizens in decision-making processes, via emotional, embodied engagement. Unlike traditional forms of facilitation, civic arts are oriented toward socially inclusive modes of whole-hearted public participation, and thus potentially towards systemic and collective change. They provide opportunities for citizens to exchange ideas and create bonds with those conventionally considered "others" or "otherized", by introducing innovative dimensions into popular discourses, such as aesthetic, emotional and non-verbal contributions. If engaging with civic arts, citizens enact fictional and creative starting points for deliberation. They create collective metaphors as ways to move from "I" to "We" and from "We" to "Whole". At a time of "intertwined polycrisis, financial meltdown, border closings and populist anger in the face of elite capture"[1] that is affecting democracy and citizens throughout the world, it is particularly important for our project to activate civic arts as means for imagining a broader range of potential alternatives. By combining participatory arts and theatre methods, as well as collective practices from the visual arts, music, and storytelling, civic arts can transform public spaces into arenas of open and creative dialogue.

This paper was edited by Christian Recchia and revised collaboratively by all members of the Civic Arts Crew.

[1] Nicolaidis, K., 2024. The Third Democratic Transformation: From European to Planetary Politics. Journal of Common Market Studies. Available at: https://kalypsonicolaidis.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/J-of-Common-Market-Studies-2024-Nicolaidis-The-Third-Democratic-Transformation-From-European-to-Planetary-Politics.pdf

Objectives of Using Civic Arts in Athens

Our primary goal of introducing civic arts into the Athens peoples' assembly was twofold: to facilitate greater citizen participation and to promote a deeper understanding of the issues under discussion. Civic arts provide alternative platforms for expressing experiences, articulating critical stances and sharing personal stories that could make decision-making processes more inclusive. In a context like Athens, with its rich history of direct democracy, civic arts represent a return to the democratic roots of citizenship while adapting it to contemporary lifeworlds.

The Role of Civic Arts in Citizens' Assemblies

Civic arts have generated a variety of innovative facilitation tools got citizen deliberation processes worldwide. The Democratic Odyssey project explored several of them together with conventional facilitation and moderation techniques to better understand how they can help bring about the change that transnational citizen assemblies want to bring about for the democratic life of Europeans. Since 2020, researchers at the European University Institute guided by Professor Kalypso Nicolaidis have performed arts projects that link theatrical performances, simulation games and immersive debates to formal deliberations and roundtable formats (see here for examples). This journey has continued with a participatory performance at the 2024's State of the Union, where the Badia Fiesolana provided the stage for a fourfold performance of theatre, dance, music, and visual arts. These were supported by innovative tools such as Mentimeter - to measure the public's views about Europe - and Playtronika - to convert ordinary objects into music (for more insights read Diana Ekzarova's ship-log).

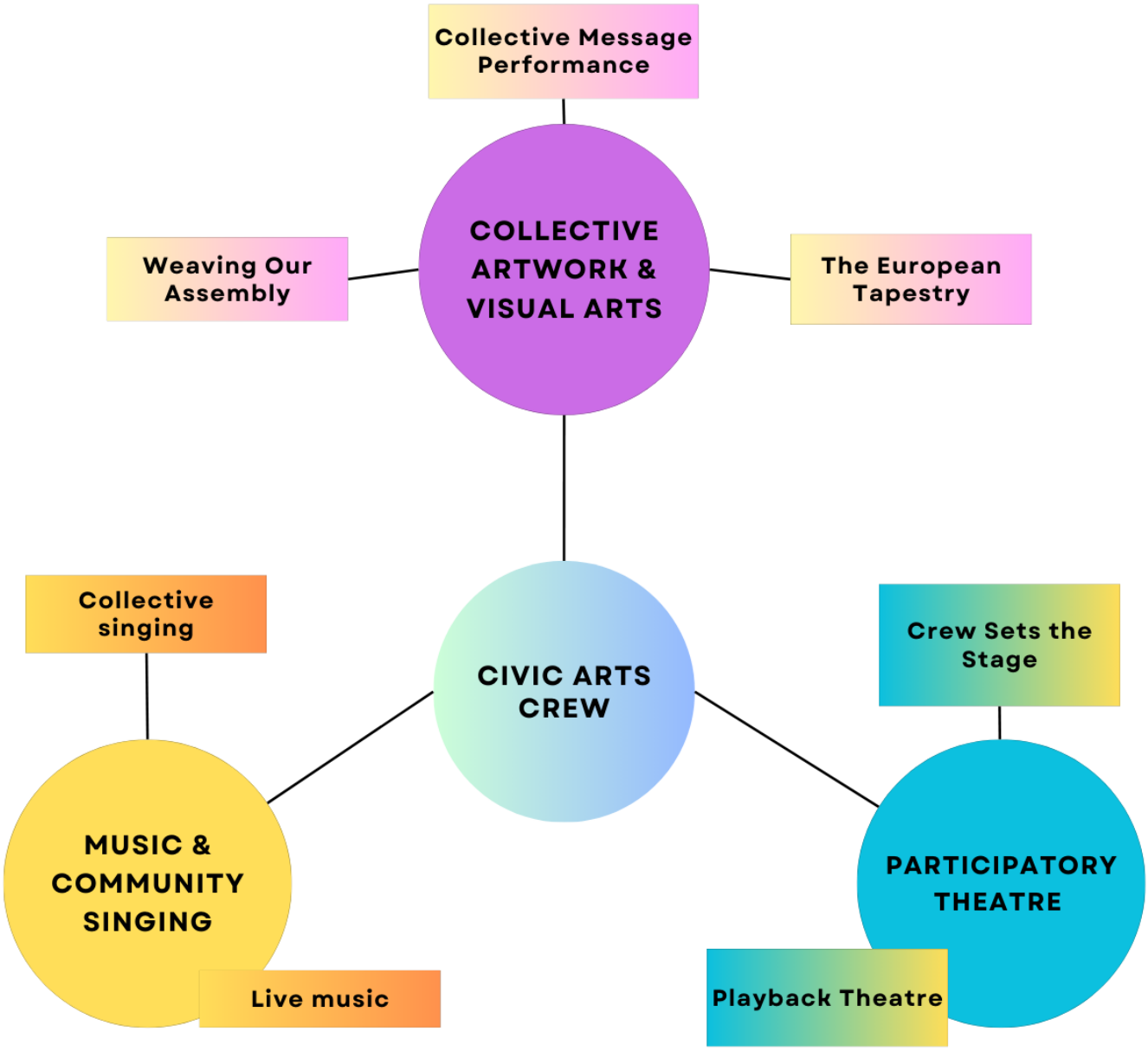
Athens, the cradle of democracy, hosted in September 2024 the Democratic Odyssey's pilot People's Assembly for Europe. Here, elements of civic arts have built on past experiences – thus starting to potentially revolutionise how citizens participate in popular assemblies and articulate themselves on the issues under discussion. Travelling from Athens to Florence and Vienna, the Democratic Odyssey's pilot assembly wants to test how civic arts can facilitate dialogue, promote understanding, and strengthen the sense of community, to subsequently inform the institutionalisation of a randomly selected, permanent people's assembly for Europe.

Summary of Civic Arts:

Summary of Civic Arts moments during the People's Assembly for Europe, Athens, 27-29 September 2024

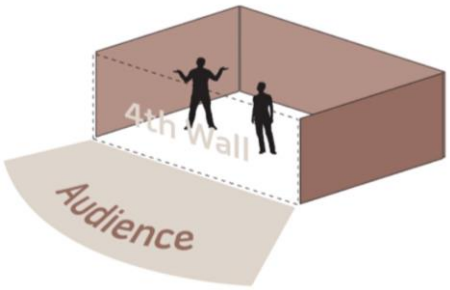
Activity	Day	Description	Goal
The "Crew Sets the Stage"	Fri, 27 Sep	The crew presents the "Democratic Odyssey" journey in a conversational format, engaging participants in reflecting on the purpose, goals, and roadmap for the assembly.	Break down the formal barrier between facilitators and participants, fostering a collaborative spirit.
The "European Tapestry Sail"	Fri & Sun, 27-29 Sep	Assembly members work in groups and deliberate collectively on how to decorate the sails of this assembly. The sails are large fabrics decorated on Sunday and after the Athens sessions.	Visually represent the assembly's collective journey and vision. Representing the hopes and will for future assemblies in a symbolic and aesthetic manner.
The "Playback Theatre"	Sat & Sun, 28-29 Sep	A participatory improvisational theatre where audience members share personal stories, which are then acted out by professional actors.	Encourage empathy, deeper reflection on crises, and envision collective futures through creative expression.
Music and Community Singing	/	Group singing a collaboratively created song based on the assembly's messages, performed in a public square. It was decided that the *collective song not be performed. * Following the Assembly, the Song Co-Captains continued the song-creation with interested participants through WhatsApp group (ongoing).*	Foster unity and community spirit through music, creating a memorable and engaging collective experience. **Some participants pointed out that the collective song, based on John Lennon's 'Power to the People,' was politicized, potentially undermining and jeopardizing the project.*
The "Weaving of our Assembly"	Pnyx, Sun 29th Sep	Participants are given three coloured threads respectively representing creativity, critique and communication, weaving them together.	Create a visual web of connections, forming a united line as they marched out of the Pnyx.

SPIDER DIAGRAM:



Participatory Theatre and Role-Play

Theatre is an ancient art form that finds new applications in modern civic assemblies. Participatory theatre is all about welcoming participants affects and views on stage, hence making a transition from "object to subject" in the way they think of themselves. In turn, role play uses that creative energy to develop alternative futures and enphasizes on agency, simulating possible solutions to the problems discussed during the assembly. This method allows participants to explore complex scenarios in an empathetic and dynamic way, simulating possible solutions to the problems discussed during the assembly. In particular, through role-playing participants take on specific roles of characters in a simulated scenario to explore different crises and possible solutions.



"Crew Sets the Stage"

The assembly had kicked off with a dynamic plenary session aimed at 'breaking the fourth wall,' the traditional barrier between facilitators and participants. The crew had engaged dynamically in an informal conversation, setting the stage for the 'Democratic Odyssey' (DO) journey, and a video had been shown on the screen to introduce the crew members. They had explored key questions, such as why Athens had been chosen, the purpose of a permanent citizens' assembly, and the significance of addressing Europe's poly-crises. The discussion had introduced the assembly's roadmap, outlining the goals and expected outcomes for the next three days, such as proposals on crisis management and future assembly topics. Participants had been invited to join the conversation, sharing their thoughts and motivations, while the crew had introduced the symbols and metaphors relevant to the Democratic Odyssey's ethos. By the end of the session, The group showcased the many debates that led to the Assembly taking place in Athens, and emphasized how collective action could help steer Europe through its future challenges.

"Playback Theatre"

Among methods of participatory arts, one of the pillars of the Assembly was playback theatre. In a Playback event, someone in the audience would tell a moment or story from their life, choose the actors to play the different roles, and then all those present would watch the enactment, as the story "comes to life" on stage. Actors drew on non-naturalistic styles to convey meaning, such as metaphor or music. Playback theatre has been used in the following fields: transitional justice, human rights, civic dialogue, refugees' inclusion, disaster recovery, and climate change.[2] Playback theatre was used during the assembly because it was as much participative (continuous communication with assembly members) as it was aesthetic (played by professional actors) and easily adapted to a multilingual deliberative context: the acting was often non-verbal and actors were trained to improvise - even if in some moments there were dialogues in Greek that missed the translation, resulting in non-Greek speaker not being able to understand some moments of the performance.

The Palmos troupe had introduced playback theatre in Greece in 2005. Since then, they had been practicing it in several languages and in several countries. They had experience in adapting playback theatre to contexts where there was a language discrepancy between the audience and the troupe, such as with communities of people in exile. They also had experienced innovations in that field, like performing through a video call during Covid (which was a promising lead to introduce arts in the follow-up to Athens in the online assembly). They were led by the psychiatrist and drama therapist Lambros Giotis, who had published several books on playback theatre. For all those reasons, a collaboration between the Democratic Odyssey and Palmos had been decided to experiment with new modes of "artistic facilitation" with the purpose of systemizing them and creating new frameworks for the use of arts among assemblies.

Saturday Afternoon Session:
In collaboration with Palmos' crew, participants shared their stories, their experiences of crisis, and some imagined near futures, which, through dialogue, were played out on stage. The objective was to build on the reflections of crisis done in the earlier session. Now, participants could work on imagining futures, their opportunities and challenges. Members could tell a story that had happened not to them, but to someone else, that they had heard over the course of the Assembly, which would build empathy (moving from the "I" to the "We").
The playback theatre troupe engaged in a participatory moment where it demanded what could have been the "newspaper headlines" in 2029 – headlines that were announced by the DO team of facilitators. This moment introduced members to the simulation moment, based on role-play of four interest groups: industry, media, policymakers, citizens, which were asked to negotiate in a world living in polycrisis in 2029. After the first playback theatre performance had finished, participants were introduced to the roles of different stakeholders in democratic crisis management. The objective was to move from playback theatre to democratizing foresight and introducing the framework of the simulation game.

[2] Playback Theatre, social justice and empathy: A diffractive review. *Applied Theatre Research*, 9(2), 117–132

Sunday Morning Session:

We drew together ancient experiences of democracy with our experimentation and vision of a more utopian democracy to deal with future crises. There was no live translation, so it had to be repeated in several languages and was largely based on movements/nonverbal expression. At the beginning, both the troupe and the facilitators roamed around the Pnyx and asked the members what it made them feel to be there (the first assembly since 2500 years!). The first 30 minutes of this performance linked our Assembly with the ancient past of Athens, while the second part delved into the final recommendations from Saturday to imagine what a democratic utopia could be and how to get there. During this session, Palmos' crew focused on finding testimonials of different social groups - such as young people, women, and migrants - that did not have the chance to be engaged the day before. The objective was to convert the dystopian visions of the future from Saturday into more ideal futures, have an idea of how to get there, and see how the proposals from Saturday evening could be embedded in those desired futures.

"Weaving Our Assembly" - The Journey of Threads:

From Concept to Collective Realization

This moment of coloured threads was envisioned as a powerful, symbolic gesture—a way to materialize the connections and evolving mindsets of participants during the Citizens' Assembly in Athens. The idea was to introduce Personality Threads early on, with participants selecting threads that corresponded to their current state of mind:

- **Blue** for vision and creativity.
- **Yellow** for critical thinking and doubt.
- **Red** for communication and collaboration.

Worn visibly, these threads were intended to signal an individual's evolving mindset throughout the day. After meaningful conversations, participants would tie their thread to someone else's, creating a growing physical web of interactions. This web would represent the Assembly's collective progress and culminate in a tangible, visual network by the end of the day.

From Plan to Practice

As the Assembly unfolded, logistical realities necessitated an adjustment. Rather than introducing the threads on the second day, the activity was reserved for the final day—Sunday, September 29—transforming it into a symbolic closure of the Assembly experience.

At the historic Pnyx, coloured threads were handed out to participants, each maintaining its original symbolic meaning. Participants embraced the ritual, weaving their threads together as they engaged in meaningful conversations. Gradually, the threads formed a long, multicolored strand that represented not only individual contributions but also the interconnectedness of the group.

A Collective Gesture

In the final moments of the Assembly, the group gathered for a culminating act. The multicolored thread was passed around, forming a large circle. This circle, vibrant with the intertwined threads of diverse voices, symbolized the Assembly's collective journey. It was a visual and tactile reminder of the connections made and the shared vision developed over the course of the event.

Leading this symbolic procession were the ambassadors selected by lottery to represent Athens at the next Assembly sessions in Florence. Together, the participants walked towards the hill, carrying the thread like a communal banner. It was a powerful metaphor: the "ship" of the Democratic Odyssey, sailing forward, connecting past, present, and future assemblies.

A Tapestry Sail of Democratic Participation

This activity ultimately highlighted the deeper essence of the Democratic Odyssey. It wasn't merely an artistic exercise but a lived demonstration of how diverse perspectives and individual contributions could weave together into a cohesive, resilient whole. The threads—initially representing individual mindsets—became part of a collective tapestry, the connecting lines of past and future sails. A tangible symbol of unity, shared purpose, and the enduring spirit of democratic participation. Leading the procession, the ten ambassadors selected by sortition for the next assembly carried the bottles containing messages written by all members of the assembly, destined for future citizens to discover

Collective Artwork and Visual Arts

Art installations, such as murals, interactive sculptures and collective drawings, can be used to visually represent the themes of the assembly. Visual arts help synthesise complex ideas into tangible forms, facilitating understanding and stimulating reflection among citizens. For example, a collective artwork could represent the diverse opinions of participants on a specific topic, creating a visual mosaic of the positions present.

The Tapestry Sails: A Collaborative Art Project

The collaborative sail-making activity, initially planned to unfold over the first two days of the Assembly, underwent significant adjustments during the event. On the first day, participants were divided into small breakout groups, each facilitated by a "Sail Guardian." Within these groups, members engaged in rich discussions, crafting slogans, drawing symbols, and sharing their collective hopes, fears, and visions for addressing Europe's future crises with collective wisdom. Younger participants, especially, took the lead in presenting their group's ideas, explaining the significance of their choice of slogans and imagery.

While the original plan was to begin creating the sails immediately, practical considerations led to a shift. The actual crafting of the sails was postponed until the final day, Sunday, at the Pnyx. There, participants enthusiastically painted and decorated large fabric pieces, embodying their group's visions. Local citizen volunteers later continued the work, ensuring the sails would be completed and sent to Florence as a legacy for the next Assembly.

During the closing ceremony, the completed sail was unveiled within the circle formed by the multicoloured thread (see previous activity). This sail, now a vibrant and collective artwork, symbolises the Democratic Odyssey's shared journey. Alongside it, a blank sail was displayed, representing the future Assembly and the ongoing nature of this democratic adventure. Participants walked together, connected by the symbolic thread and carrying the sail, toward the Pnyx, in a powerful act of unity and hope.

The activity not only fostered creativity and collaboration but also left participants deeply connected to the symbolic and artistic representation of their collective journey.

Democratic Odyssey

Music and Community Singing

Music has the power to unite people and create a sense of belonging. Community singing can be used to strengthen the spirit of cohesion and create an atmosphere of solidarity among participants. During a citizen assembly, music can serve as a regenerative break that can convey harmony and relaxation, helping citizens recharge and refocus.

Planned Activity:
The DO Song was originally conceived as a unifying, reflective moment to foster harmony among participants. Its goal was to creatively capture the spirit of the Assembly through lyrics inspired by democratic ideals, set to popular and engaging melodies like acoustic folk or classic anthems such as John Lennon song 'Power to the People'. The plan aimed to maximise participation through group singing, interactive call-and-response sections, and a collaborative lyric-writing process based on Assembly messages.

Key Elements of the Plan:

- Participant Engagement: Involve volunteers in the performance, facilitated through visible sign-up panels and QR codes.
- Co-creation of Lyrics: A three-step process to draft, refine, and adapt lyrics using Assembly inputs, slogans, and AI tools.
- Music Selection: Blend original compositions with familiar tunes for accessibility and impact.
- Audience Interaction: Encourage communal singing and participation by distributing lyrics, displaying them, and sharing the song's democratic message.

Critical Evaluation of the Gaps in Scheduling and Facilitation
Despite its potential and the participants' positive response, the music dimension faced challenges due to a lack of integration into the event's facilitation schedule. With 250 participants, organising a structured activity such as songwriting or group rehearsals for a performance outside the main Assembly room proved difficult. Although the democratic festival with a concert was part of the program, the crucial elements of rehearsing with captains, volunteers, and participants, as well as the facilitation of these creative activities, were notably missing.

The issue was not a lack of interest in the music initiative – this was evident on the final day when participants shared thoughts and feelings with crew members. However, this dimension required better planning, attention, and a systematic approach to allow the music element to

flourish as intended. The absence of these preparations limited the scope for collaborative creativity and broader participation.

What Happened:
Instead of following the initial structured plan, the activity evolved dynamically. Throughout the Assembly, facilitators incorporated informal singing sessions, creating a relaxed and joyful environment. This spontaneous approach organically invited participants to engage in the co-creation process, sparking discussions about what kind of song could best represent the Assembly's values.

Decision to Pause the Performance:
A proposed song using the 'Power to the People' tune was met with concern. Some participants highlighted the song's historical and political associations, which could inadvertently align the Assembly with certain ideologies or regimes. Respecting these concerns, the group decided to forgo the planned performance.

This decision turned out to be a pivotal moment, reinforcing the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in participatory processes. It highlighted a key lesson: *co-design and flexibility are essential to building trust and ensuring that all voices are heard*. *Activities should emerge organically from the collective input rather than being imposed top-down*.

Outcome:
After the Assembly, the co-captains invited all participants to join a WhatsApp group dedicated to collaboratively creating a song for the next gathering. This ongoing effort exemplifies the Assembly's commitment to inclusivity and collective ownership of its creative processes.

Lessons Learned:

- *Flexibility Matters*: Pre-planned activities must adapt to participants' feedback and concerns.
- *Shared Ownership*: The best outcomes arise when participants feel their input shapes the final product.
- *Deliberative Creativity*: Even artistic elements should reflect the Assembly's democratic ethos.
- *Ensuring Holistic Approach*: Songwriting, as well as the theatre and the tapestry, were presented together as a concept and required an equal amount of time in the working schedule of the assembly.

The result is a richer, more meaningful collaborative process, with participants actively shaping their shared narrative for future assemblies.

Challenges and Opportunities in Implementing Civic Arts

Implementing civic arts is not without challenges. One of the main difficulties lies in the need for skilled facilitators who can effectively guide artistic processes in a civic context. Moreover, the available venue needs to fit the requirements of the specific art genre. Additionally, measuring the direct impact of civic arts on decision-making outcomes can be complex. However, the opportunities far outweigh these challenges. Civic arts have the transformative potential to redefine how citizens engage with each other and with institutions, fostering a deeper sense of shared responsibility and civic involvement. Insights from the Athens Assembly will further illuminate the potential of these practices.

During the Assembly, we encountered several points of resistance when our plans met the realities on the ground—moments that became profound learning experiences. These challenges reflect the emerging and groundbreaking nature of civic arts, revealing the often-invisible tensions within the conversation. This, in a way, highlights why civic arts are so valuable: they foster deep and meaningful dialogue that goes beyond surface-level exchanges, uncovering the deeper layers, sources, and roots of division that may exist among us—divisions we must confront to move forward. One major point of tension was negotiating the role of arts and the "social objects" we co-created within traditionally "serious" or "rational" settings. Physically, this was evident in the presentation of the sail in the grand hall of Athens University, where we had to navigate around the classical architecture and ensure the art was neither intrusive nor diminished by its surroundings.

On the final day, we faced an unexpected challenge when the guards and archaeological team responsible for the Pnyx site requested that we refrain from displaying or drawing on the sails due to site regulations. This moment added an unintended activist dimension to our work, requiring us to literally and figuratively carve out space for our creative practices. Similarly, a planned musical performance inspired by the song *Power to the People* was re-evaluated after participants raised concerns about its historical and political associations. This decision underscored the importance of flexibility and co-design in participatory processes, ensuring activities reflect collective input rather than being imposed top-down.

These encounters were pivotal: carrying the sail through the hill as though cradling a precious child or persuading the guards to grant just a few more minutes to complete a design atop the hill overlooking the Pnyx became powerful acts of civic expression. These moments demonstrated how creative vision meets the constraints of reality. If art expands the space of what we can imagine, civic arts push the boundaries of how citizens might engage with and challenge existing power structures. They inspire collective action, fostering a shared journey toward the vision and practice of true democracy—for the people, by the people, and with the people.

Towards a Future of Creative Participation

The upcoming sessions of the DO's pilot citizens' assembly in Florence, in Vienna and possibly other European cities represents a unique opportunity to experiment with civic arts as facilitation tools. By integrating these creative practices into the decision-making process, Athens' first Peoples' assembly honoured its democratic heritage, hopefully innovating and inspiring other experiments of civic participation worldwide. The success of this initiative marks the beginning of a new era of civic participation, where arts and culture play a central role in str15engthening democracy and social cohesion.