

# Thinking Like a Mountain

Supplement

## Convivial Rituals. Of herbs, seaweeds and other communities

Alice Labor

*"In ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined [...] turns out to be the same world."*<sup>1</sup>

Clifford Geertz

*"Becoming aware of our existence goes hand in hand with a state of communion."*<sup>2</sup>

Susan Griffin

*What we most lack is a belief in the world, we've quite lost the world, it's been taken from us. If you believe in the world you precipitate events, however inconspicuous, that elude control, you engender new space-times, however small their surface or volume. It's what you call pietas. Our ability to resist control, or our submission to it, has to be assessed at the level of our every move. We need both creativity and a people."*<sup>3</sup>

Gilles Deleuze

*Our body is the archive of what the sun offers the Earth."*<sup>4</sup>

Emanuele Coccia

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<sup>1</sup> Geertz C., *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, 1973, p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> Griffin S., *The Eros of Everyday Life: Essays on Ecology, Gender and Society*, Doubleday, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Deleuze G., *Negotiations (1972–1990)*, Colombia University Press, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Coccia E., *La vita delle piante. Metafisica della mescolanza*, il Mulino, 2018, 118.

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Gathering around a table is a primordial gesture that has accompanied our need for nourishment, conviviality, and sharing since the dawn of time. Coming together and sharing food are customs common to humans and the non-humans with whom we coexist. Trees, grasses, and mushrooms find their nourishment collectively, connected by hidden underground networks that reveal the complex system of knowledge transmission and cooperation on which their existence is based. Similarly, like any other animal, we have always united to obtain the resources we need to sustain ourselves. Be it around a table, a rug, a fire, or a basket, the forms of being together do not alter the substance of our conviviality,<sup>5</sup> our “living together.”

At a time when the sense of humanity is fading and spaces for coexistence are being destroyed, from Palestine to Ukraine, from Sudan to Kashmir, the political urgency to recreate places for sharing, for meeting, and for collectively redefining how we know the world seems to emerge ever more strongly from the practices of artists everywhere. I would like to share some reflections and research on the relationships that link a number of these artistic practices with food, the geographies and communities in which they are embedded, and the ritual dimension that accompanies them. In particular, I will focus on certain moments of conviviality that have taken shape in Italy over the last few years to collectively reflect on and rethink the links with the histories and territories of

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<sup>5</sup> From the etymology of the term “convivium” (*cum + vivere*).

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which we are a part. I like to view these spaces as tools for redefining our place in the world in an ecosystemic key, taking into account the whole range of organisms in their diversity and complexity so as to rethink the making of art and coexistence on this planet today.

Ritual refers to bonds, the creation of connections, and practices of harmonization and regeneration. It is a cultural construct without a universal or archetypal definition, yet rather rich in multiple and particular meanings that reflect a specific way of looking at and organizing reality.<sup>6</sup> One of the dominant characteristics of the ritual is plasticity, the ability to be polysemic and to adapt to social change. “Rituals are symbolic acts that represent, and pass on, the values and orders on which a community is based.”<sup>7</sup> In this dynamic of meaning production, ritual space becomes an instrument of resistance and, as philosopher Byung-Chul Han reminds us, its disappearance leaves a symbolic void in its wake. Ritual invites us to transcend our individuality in order to develop a certain ecology of attention, inscribing itself in our bodies, creating knowledge and embodied memories.

The ritual dimension provides the foundations for the re-enchantment of the world.<sup>8</sup> The inequalities inherent in capitalism confront us with the urgent need to reimagine forms and ways of living together, making

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<sup>6</sup> C. Bell, *Ritual. Perspectives and dimensions*, Oxford University Press, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Han B.-C., *The Disappearance of Rituals. A Topology of the Present*, Polity, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> S. Consigliere, *Favole del reincanto. Molteplicità, immaginario, rivoluzione*, Derive e approdi, 2020.

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disenchantment a path to cross towards another dimension, one of community, solidarity, and care.<sup>9</sup> Feminist sociologist Silvia Federici emphasizes the importance of re-establishing the connections between bodies, territories, and knowledge.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, rituals, festivals, collective kitchens, and forms of shared care can function as symbolic and material infrastructures that remove everyday life from the extractive logic, recreating bonds of responsibility and political imagination. In this “commoning” operation, i.e. that of doing things in common, spaces open up to define other uses, memories, and belongings. Thus, the presence of the other, whether human, plant, animal, or spiritual, becomes perceptible.

Care, as a speculative and situated practice, in fact traverses more-than-human, multispecies worlds. Caring for soils, waters, plants, and their communities, both visible and invisible, is an activity that sustains and recomposes worlds. From this point of view, convivial and interspecific rituals are practices of care that foster shared perceptions. Through gathering, preparing, tasting, touching, and listening, conscious relationships with others may be articulated, and common and inclusive imaginaries may be generated, capable of

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<sup>9</sup> “The main instrument of disenchantment is the expropriation of the earth. Earth in the broadest sense: when we talk about the earth, we also mean forests, seas, and animals. What was once the universe of enchantment, composed of creative worlds in which life still reproduces itself today. Worlds that capitalism has had to regiment and control.” S. Federici and K-assandra, “Reincantare l’oscurità del mondo,” *Notzine*, 3.

<https://not.neroeditions.com/reincantare-loscurita-del-mondo/>.

<sup>10</sup> S. Federici S., *Reincantare il mondo*, ombre corte, 2018.

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holding together an affective ecology and economy. Hence, the community is not only the audience of the ritual but its outcome: a collective in the making that is performatively constituted through repeated gestures of care shaped by contact with living and non-living presences.

On a symbolic level, ritual is not simply a container of pre-established meanings, but a practice that produces and negotiates values and belonging. It consolidates a shared imagination by organizing experience into embodied and recognizable forms, through gestures and words that distinguish it from everyday life. As historian Catherine Bell points out, this process of ritualization establishes and renews the categories through which a community thinks about itself. From this perspective, the effectiveness of ritual does not lie in abstract symbolic representation, but in its social and material performativity, in the postures, repetitions, and frames that make certain acts memorable.<sup>11</sup> Rituals can offer perspectives of worlds that are habitable with and for other living beings by suspending—at least temporarily—dominant logics and creating liminal spaces that recompose relationships, institutions, and power hierarchies.

In this vein, various artistic practices today seek opportunities for collective re-enchantment and a reinvention of the ways in which we know reality through the shared rediscovery of the edible. Eating together, like

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<sup>11</sup> C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Oxford University Press, 1992.

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protesting, still retains that ritual and communal dimension that seems to resist, despite its evolution, uprooting and erosion. These situated practices raise epistemic questions based on interspecies and human care, listening to multiple intelligences, and creating other forms of shared knowledge to redesign stories of possible futures.<sup>12</sup> By rediscovering marginalized knowledge, alternative narratives of the present are constructed; submerged or forgotten stories re-emerge only to initiate processes of the decolonization of collective perspectives and imaginaries.

Much of this research finds itself weaving relationships with the plant world. Wild herbs, cultivated plants, berries, and algae thus become agents of shared action that refer to ancestral traditions or future forms of edibility. The history of the relationship between humans and plants begins with the origin of the world. The bonds that unite us have always been a source of nourishment, care, knowledge, and study, as well as economic investment and trade. The network that binds us is intrinsic to our existence. It is plant organisms that constitute the atmosphere in which we exist, and it is through breathing and photosynthesis that we become one with the world and penetrate the environment, incorporating it.<sup>13</sup> The creation of alliances with plant bodies through artistic research opens up new perspectives of meaning. Plants, in all their forms, are recognized within these practices as political subjects, despite the centrality of the human

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<sup>12</sup> M. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> E. Coccia, *La vita delle piante. Metafisica della mescolanza*, il Mulino, 2018.

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perspective.

Thus, the Palermo-based duo of artists, farmers, and activists Aterraterra proposes a series of discursive encounters in which the invitation to rethink the categories with which we understand the world is translated into tasting sessions. With the *Foodscapes* series, they create spaces for collective questioning of the notions of “edible,” “invasive,” and “exotic” by relating directly to food and the language we use to name it “to try to observe and deconstruct narratives that are often assumed to be neutral and natural.”<sup>14</sup> By tasting plants commonly referred to as “invasive,” sourced from the urban areas where they intervene or from their own garden, the artists demonstrate the fluidity of these purely human attributes, overturning taste paradigms and broadening the spectrum of flavors and textures. “But it is precisely there, through taste and the body, that a kind of rupture occurs, a crack in the pattern, something that initiates an unexpected relationship with the plant. During the food performance, a sort of common metabolic act was generated, in which we ate together while listening to and reconsidering taken-for-granted narratives and definitions.”<sup>15</sup>

Rather than being an attempt to exalt local traditions or the territory, these sessions are proposed as paths of observation and taste investigation aimed at

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<sup>14</sup> Fiocco F., *Uncommon appetites*, in *Arts of the Working Class*, 2025, <https://artsoftheworkingclass.org/text/uncommon-appetites-1>.

<sup>15</sup> Fiocco F., *Uncommon appetites*, in *Arts of the Working Class*, 2025. <https://artsoftheworkingclass.org/text/uncommon-appetites-1>.

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understanding the complexity of ecosystems. Tasting the wild plants of a place also means savoring the place itself and the relationships that underpin it. These experiments introduce other consumption practices far removed from the agri-food production and distribution circuits based on extractive relationships and forms of oppression and exploitation of human and more-than-human bodies. Industrial agriculture simplifies ecosystems and, behind the myth of monocultures, reveals a violent and colonial mentality. Starting from these observations, Aterraterra critically questions the identity concepts and dominant narratives surrounding the products we eat.

The collective was founded in 2020 by Fabio Aranzulla and Luca Cinquemani in Palermo. Cultivation, political thought, and artistic practices are inextricably intertwined in their research. Being in relation characterizes their practice more than anything else: living and non-living, beyond any anthropocentric perspective. From post-varietal communities to edibility projects in museums and cultural centers, they transform places starting from their metabolic relationships. “Institutions should rethink themselves not only as human communities, but as broader communities that also include other forms of life. This carries consequences not only in terms of care but also in terms of positioning and the assumption of responsibility, especially in a context where the effects of climate change are increasingly evident and alarming.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Fiocco F., *Uncommon appetites*, in *Arts of the Working Class*, 2025.  
<https://artsoftheworkingclass.org/text/uncommon-appetites-1>.



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Amid local knowledge and a social and political dimension of conviviality, there is also the TOCIA! Cucina e comunità collective. Founded in 2019 on the initiative of Marco Bravetti, over the years it has expanded to include researchers who, starting from the Venice lagoon, experiment with gestures, recipes, and practices of situated ecology. The name of the collective comes from *tocio*, the sauce-cum-manifesto that accompanies many of their actions. It is an open-source sauce, fermented using the koji technique, of which the ingredients vary from time to time depending on the territory in which it is shared, layered into an edible archive of stories. *Tociar* is the act of dipping bread, a primary need and an initiatory moment that opens up discovery through the mouth. Using food as an ecological and community device, TOCIA! delves into the fragility of the landscape and seeks new sustainable ways of inhabiting it. As a living organism, Venice translates into their practice through the collection of wild species and dialogues with local fishermen and farmers. The environment becomes a subject with which to relate through stories and communities to listen to.

The *AMALGAMA* project, developed in 2025 by researchers Chiara Famengo and Fulvia Larena together with the TOCIA! and Barena Bianca<sup>17</sup> collectives, investigates the submerged ecologies of the lagoon

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<sup>17</sup> The Barena Bianca Collective was founded in the summer of 2018 by Fabio Cavallari and Pietro Consolandi as an activist group in the Venetian lagoon, with the aim of bringing ecological and sociological issues to light, adopting the Barena area (mudflats) as its emblem – <https://www.barenabianca.earth/>.

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through algae, together with fishermen and scientists. Often invisible, algae can be integrated into food systems, local ecologies, and economies in a context such as Venice, which is highly sensitive to climate change: from rising sea levels to increased salinity, from water pollution to the introduction of non-autochthonous species through human activities. Nevertheless, algae are adapting and, through this multidisciplinary research, may serve as both bioindicators and edible ingredients. Among the various actions implemented, the project aims to transform local food traditions by including unwanted species and turning culinary knowledge into a form of ecological intelligence. The new inhabitants of the lagoon become opportunities to reinvent everyday life and the habits that accompany it. The *Convivi Acquatici* proposed as part of the project are invitations to come together to reimagine lagoon banquets and new ecosystems that embrace non-native species. This practice of relationship-building takes on political significance and a sense of responsibility towards the territory in which we coexist.

“We embarked on a journey of listening and observation, led more by questions than answers, more by slow glances than certainties. We allowed ourselves to be guided by submerged presences, by algae in particular. We followed them, observed them, letting ourselves be transformed. We tried to think with them. [...] Observing algae means reading the signs of a changing landscape. It means training ourselves to adapt, rethinking the ways

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we inhabit the lagoon.”<sup>18</sup> Projects such as *AMALGAMA*, and the series of *Tavole Conviviali* from which it originated,<sup>19</sup> embody a vision of food as an ecological, social, and critical device. Far from the rhetoric of sustainability, these practices construct gestures that are both rooted in place and open to encounter, capable of transforming the kitchen into a political and narrative space.

In research projects such as those of TOCIA! and Aterraterra, food becomes a performative and symbolic medium in which the gestures of preparation, consumption, and sharing are transformed into rituals of solidarity and care. The physical dimension of conviviality becomes a tool for the emancipation of stories, the search for sustainable and inclusive practices, intercultural dialogue, and reflection on the dynamics of power and inequalities related to food and its production systems. Food is a symbol of these tensions, but also an opportunity to imagine alternatives for sustenance and for living together. In this way, these ritual and performative moments generate spaces for communion, exchange, resistance, and transformation.

At the root of all these experiences, which are part of a broader genealogy of edible artistic practices and

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<sup>18</sup> C. Famengo (ed.), Barena Bianca and Tocal! Cucina e Comunità, *Amalgama*, bruno, 2025.

<sup>19</sup> *Tavole Conviviali* is the field research program commissioned by TBA21 – Academy at Ocean Space dedicated to the links between food and ecology and how these influence water bodies. *Tavole Conviviali, paesaggi in movimento* was the fourth edition of the cycle, curated by Chiara Famengo, Barena Bianca, and Tocal! – <https://www.ocean-space.org/it/ricerca/tavole-conviviali.html>.

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represent only a small part of the variety of experiments that continue to take shape today between food, conviviality, and ecologies,<sup>20</sup> there is a transformative and speculative thought process that seeks to reimagine being in the world and collectively experiments with rules, linguistic notions, gestures, and recipes through multispecies co-creation strategies.<sup>21</sup> Welcoming and hosting around a table is a radical act of inclusion that promotes other spaces of knowledge and belonging. Conviviality is therefore a pedagogical and ritualistic tool, an act of embodiment in which the values of a community are experienced and redefined. By eating together, these intimate and communal practices shape generative relationships. “These confusing and troubled times are overflowing with pain and joy, with recurring and highly unjust patterns of pain and joy, in which we witness not only the bloody and unnecessary death of existence and progress, but also its necessary rebirth. The goal is to generate kinship—kindred spirits—through inventive connections: a necessary practice for learning to live and die well, with one another, in such a dense present.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Among the many other collectives and projects that have taken place in Italy in recent years, we would like to mention the ife collective, Climavore, *Trattoria Guaiana* by Niccolò Moronato, Fritto Misto, Luca Conte aka Gerolamore, Leone Contini, Luca Trevisani, fugaz, *Echoes of Ingredients* by Valerio Del Baglivo, and many others.

<sup>21</sup> “The question of how we can make the human table more convivial requires fundamentally rethinking our interactions with other creatures and considering our dependency on living beings (...) it means opening up our field of ethical imagination to the other beings that are implicated in the food at the table (...)”. K. Donati, “The Convivial Table. Imagining ethical relations through multispecies gastronomy,” in *The Aristologist: An Antipodean Journal of Food History*. 4, 2014, pp. 127–143.

<sup>22</sup> D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke

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Kinship is a wild category, and through speculative and unexpected experiments, it is possible to trace other narratives in the dark. I have spent the last year exploring certain artistic practices that rely on a ritual dimension, in which objects, subjects, and stories converge to redefine gazes, gestures, and knowledge. I listened to the ecologies of sound, delved into the depths of the underground, among the shadows of hybrid bodies and the fermentation of organic matter, discovering gratitude for a garden, until I evoked the ghostly voices of the ancestors who came before us. Through the darkness, other worlds emerged, and in my research I attempted to rethink the categories on which my understanding of reality and the relationships that constitute it are based. It has been a tortuous journey, as is the frenetic and often inhumane time we live in, but it has also been a road made up of alliances, joyful kinships, shared meals, and gifts for which I am grateful.<sup>23</sup>

“To exist in a state of communion is to be aware of the nature of existence. This is where ecology and social justice come together, with the knowledge that life is held in common.”<sup>24</sup>

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University Press, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> The article is part of Alice Labor's research project *Ecologie rituali / Ritual Ecologies* supported by the Directorate-General for Contemporary Creativity of the Ministry of Culture as part of the Italian Council program (13<sup>th</sup> edition, 2024).

<sup>24</sup> S. Griffin S., *The Eros of Everyday Life: Essays on Ecology, Gender and Society*, Doubleday, 1995.

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## Biographical Notes

Alice Labor is a curator at the Museo MACRO in Rome. Over the years, she has collaborated with contemporary art museums and cultural institutions such as the CEAAC in Strasbourg, the Institute for Postnatural Studies in Madrid, the Biennale Gherdëina, MACTE in Termoli, MUSE – Science Museum in Trento, Pirelli HangarBicocca in Milan, Centro Pecci in Prato, and Castello di Rivoli. Between 2022 and 2023, she curated the Chiara Fumai Archive. In 2020, she obtained her doctorate from the IMT School for Advanced Studies in Lucca. She was co-founder of the CampoBase curatorial collective. She furthered her research at the Van Abbemuseum, BAK, MAXXI, Museo Madre, and Castello di Rivoli Research Center. Her project *Ecologie rituali / Ritual Ecologies* won the Italian Council 13 research grant (2024).