**Conversations on Creative Climate Leadership Podcast**

Episode 3: REPAIR

**SPEAKERS**

Louis VI, Farah Ahmed, Allison O'Connor, Gaja Mežnarić Osole

**Louis VI** 00:03

Man, episode three. That means we're already halfway through this mini series of ours. If you're a latecomer or joining us here, where have you been? Here's the recap, though. My name is Louis VI. I'm a musician and zoologist and hosting this podcast. And this podcast is all about creative climate leadership. What even is that and why, when we look around the place, could we do with a whole lot more of it? Farah is guiding me through. Hi Farah,

**Farah Ahmed** 00:30

Hi Louis.

**Louis VI** 00:32

I feel like you've always got something interesting lined up for us.

**Farah Ahmed** 00:35

Always! Take a listen to this.

**Allison O'Connor** 00:38

My name is Allison O'Connor. I'm based in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. I am an artist and installation artist, but predominantly I'm a public art Commissioner. So I commissioned public art for the City of Ottawa. It's one of a few jobs with that title, which is really great. So what I do is I work with public funds to identify locations and work with community to identify projects that they would like in their community. So public art projects, and these could be in a variety of different forms, so we can get into that and but then from there, we find artists, and we create installations or sculptures or temporary projects for different public spaces, so that could be libraries, fire stations, any public building, and also roadways and parks, which is the area that I'm the most interested in.

**Gaja Mežnarić Osole** 01:33

And my name is Gaja Mežnarić Osole. I'm based in Ljubljana, currently calling from Stockholm, or I'm doing Iaspis artist residency for three months. But yeah, I think I can describe myself best at the moment as a co initiator and eco social designer at Krater which is an 18,000 square metre construction site that was feralised in the past 30 years and in which we have set up a production laboratory. But also like collective practice between interdisciplinary practitioners, from ecologist permaculturists, landscape architects, architects, designers and so on, to kind of collectively, stewarding the land, but also to kind of co-create on the site across, regenerative material culture, sort of bio materials, direct engagement with the site, biodiversity, but also a lot of advocacy work that we have to do in order to keep up the site.

**Louis VI** 02:41

All right, so we're gonna hear from Gaja and Alison, any pointers.

**Farah Ahmed** 02:46

I think a lot about repair when I think about creative climate leadership, and these are two people who I think are really taking that word and running with it. So let's hear what they've got to share.

**Louis VI** 02:59

Gaja, Allison, welcome to the podcast. Very happy to have you with us. This series is all about creative climate leadership, and I want to begin about focusing. Begin on focusing, though, on those words and what they really mean. So Creative Climate Leadership, what does that mean to you, and how does that live in your day to day work. Gaja, do you want to start us off?

**Gaja Mežnarić Osole** 03:24

Yeah, so creator operates on certain grounds, so we have to, like, prolong our content, our temporary contract each year as the state plans to build the site over in the future and as part of the artist in residency at Iaspis yeah, one of the characteristic of our leadership is basically that is collective and very diverse and distributed and that kind of Yeah, we are gathered. Or somehow people who are investing their careers on working with the site are really willing to contribute at their best, and I think in this way, to work in kind of a very precarious situation, also trying to reinvent what creativity can mean somehow becomes possible.

**Louis VI** 04:16

Already it sounds like, I think there's going to be a theme of spaces, and we'll get back into that a bit more in depth later on. But Allison, how about you? How is Creative Climate Leadership appearing in your day to day work?

**Allison O'Connor** 04:31

Yeah a lot of what Gaja is saying, and it's really interesting to hear about their projects and what they're doing, but just how our leadership structure is different in the sense that guys really collaborative, it's really people, you know, getting involved, whereas my leadership role is more institutional. I work for the municipality. I work for the city. And so, you know, we're we have very similar goals, but we have different challenges and different. And so for finance, for example, we don't necessarily have that challenge, but we have other challenges such as bureaucracy, such as trying to get public engagement. And so really, from my perspective, is trying to leverage my position to find the loopholes, find the ways to engage the public in climate action in their public spaces. And there is a big responsibility that I feel with that. Because we're using public funding, we're using public spaces. These are spaces and funding that belong to the citizens of our city, and so how are we responsibly using them in a ways that that is helpful for the community and that is in also in turn, helpful for the climate. And so some of the projects that we've done ar, really deeply rooted in community engagement and also in system changes. So we have new projects going on with which is a partnership with our local arts council, which is an artist in residency in government. So what I've done is identified departments within the city that are willing to take on an artist in residence. So this is an artist that will be working with them for a year to year and a half, just deep delving into, how does this department run? How are you doing things, and how can we possibly find creative solutions to some of the problems? And again, it allows for these you know, municipal departments and municipal employees to be able to do things a little differently because they have an external artist that is able to pinpoint some of the challenges and initiate some ways in which to remediate them.

**Louis VI** 06:36

It's interesting all the conversations we're having around Creative Climate Leadership. And there's been many different definitions and people liking or not liking the leadership word, and already you guys have brought up something new and interesting. And I think it's around the idea that you know, towards a common goal you need that that creative community level, as well as that maybe more hierarchical local government level, but also maybe that has greater access, and then the community can come and do some things that may be a bit more radical that the local government can't do, but talking about that creative common goal and the spaces both of you seem to be talking about, each episode is based around a characteristic we think of Creative Climate Leadership, and this episode's word is repair. What does it mean to have repair when going about some of this work you're talking about, and particularly repairing in these spaces, because that's really the common theme here.

**Gaja Mežnarić Osole** 07:47

Yeah, I'm thinking like to start with the work of Krater, the first act of repair that we did once we kind of gained the contract with the Ministry of Justice, who is currently kind of managing the site, was basically to open an enclosed site public land back to for the public so I don't want to install the door in the fence and kind of start the public programme and basically give access to the place that was for 30 years before erased from the public memory basically.

**Louis VI** 08:24

And what was this land before that, whilst it was private?

**Gaja Mežnarić Osole** 08:28

So this land was until early 90s, kind of built over with an old Austro Hungarian military kind of complex that after the seizure of Yugoslavia and the fall of the regime, was not as an infrastructure invited anymore to be part of the city centre. So all the military structure infrastructure was being whether demolished or kind of placed or kind of repurposed and in the case of this Austro Hungarian barracks, they decided I think in ‘94 to bring down the building. And one quarter of the whole, kind of portion of the land was left abandoned, and the rest of the land was kind of reconstructed into a residential neighbourhood. And there were, like many plans for this particular land, what could happen. It was like, state competitions were unfolding and imagining different kind of state infrastructure to be built on the site, but it never happened. So in this course of now 30 years, I guess, what happened is that nature could take in, take over the site and build a really exceptional pioneering ecology, to claim the work of nature as work of repair in itself. I think it's the second thing that is very crucial for our work to recognise that we are not the sole creators here, and that basically our cities are already being supported by like natural cycles and like feral ecologies, you know, all around that are still not recognised, basically as spaces of biodiversity or like spaces of repair and being constantly and continuously built over.

**Louis VI** 10:37

Allison, have you got anything to speak to the repair in your work because there are differences or similarities?

**Allison O'Connor** 10:43

A lot of similarities, a lot of artists, let's say so there has been a significant shift in how artists perceive their role in working in public spaces, and a lot of it aligns with what Gaja and her collective are doing, which is educating the public through these opportunities for public art. And so some of the projects I can use as example, we have an artwork that's going to be unveiling, shortly called waterways, by Melanie Myers and Pierre Le Chima, and they are exposing the kind of secret life of aquatic plants in a river nearby. It's the Rita River. It's a significant landmark within our city. And so what they're doing a they've created these beautiful archways that exist within the park that actually depict the plants that you wouldn't normally see. But along with it is audio recordings from the plants as they submerge microphones in the water to record at different seasons what that would sound like, in addition to working with scientists to give us information and facts, figures, etc, about these plants, and so they're just kind of revealing the hidden life within The river that we can't really access. And so, as I mentioned, artists are really looking at these public art commissions and as opportunities to engage the public in the local ecosystem, Flora, Fauna, etc.

**Louis VI** 12:14

Well I mean, that's so up my street with the sounds of the aquatic plants, and bringing that into the kind of artistic approach, on understanding how stuff is changing. I mean, I'm a big proponent. I mean, I guess we're listening to a podcast right here as well, but I think sound has got a really unique way of transporting us somewhere. And you know, even more so on the water, when we get into, yeah, an aquatic world, the sound, I'd be so interested to hear how it the river sounds different throughout the seasons, and, you know, due to the density of plants, but also the biodiversity that brings us, that's a really exciting, interesting project there. And I guess, I mean, there's, you've mentioned a lot about public art, but what makes art public necessary, what are or conversely, what makes it private? How, what? What are you battling there to bring stuff into a space where it is publicly owned and appreciated? Or maybe access is a better word, being able to be accessed by the public?

**Allison O'Connor** 13:18

Yeah I think that comes a lot to one of your previous questions around or comments about space and how people who has ownership over these spaces, and whether it's a digital space in the context of the sound recording or a physical space in context to the archway in the park, it's really being mindful of where you're putting things, how you're putting things for who you're putting them there for. That's really how I kind of see a public space and public art, and who is it serving. So there are, you know, increasingly, more interest in seeing how similar to a guy's group, how the practices can actually serve the non-human. So it's not only human-centric experiences right now, we're really in the educational component. But I think I see this a bit as a spectrum when we're thinking of, you know, we have a lot of artwork that represents nature, so it's like a three dimensional piece that depicts nature, so that you have it within your public spaces. Often they're like urban spaces, where you want to bring in that reference to nature a little bit more. And then you have artwork that is, you know, in collaboration, or an education with nature to kind of educate the public around unseen, Flora, Fauna, etc. And then there's collaboration with nature and like and for nature. So what are projects that can not only be in service of the human population, but the local flora, fauna, etc? So we're somewhere on that spectrum right now. We haven't hit that full other end where we're creating artwork for the non-human yet it is really hard to justify tax dollars for that. But I think there is a way to find, again, a mutual benefit to creating objects and pricing object and public spaces that are for the public at large, like inter human, inter species, public.

**Louis VI** 15:16

Yeah I mean, that's really exciting here, hearing that language coming out of governmental bodies, though. I mean, we definitely are lacking that in the UK. And I think having even that conversation of like, what makes people feel, what in spaces, and how do you want people to leave feeling that space? And not just people, but the more-than-human world? And you both started kind of answering this question already. But I guess, how can we make the more than human world be such a creative collaborator in the design of public space? And how do we necessarily commission that art? And guy, you kind of started speaking in it as well. When you saying, Well, I loved what you said, where you're saying, letting nature do it is, repairing itself. And you kind of said places get feralized. Is that the same thing as re-wilding is rate? Is re-wilding like a creative act from nature and is that a way of collaborating, or is it need to be more intentional?

**Gaja Mežnarić Osole** 16:18

Yeah I will just maybe get back to to the statement of, really, like, first noticing what's going on on the ground. I think it's really the starting point of any kind of regenerative action. And obviously, like a lot of things, are already working in support of repair, just to maybe speak through the lens of invasive plants that, for example, normally would not be welcomed within our urban ecologies. But basically, if we think like how much soil they're producing on the lane on the lands, basically where otherwise nothing would grow up like they would produce in autumn, like huge amounts of amounts of pollen for the bees to feed on during and to be fed during the winter. They would also produce huge amount of biomass so humans could make use of and so on and so on. So trying to recognise the work that is already done, I think, is important. But then, obviously, I think inventing, you know, myriad of ways of ecological stewardship through which humans can also engage in supporting these psychological practices that we're, for example, trying to do also on Krater trying to understand which areas of landscape, for example, would need some more support. Many ways, maybe it's an interesting project that just happened was it last autumn that landscape architect engaged with on Krater and she, for example, wanted to play around this idea of how we can repurpose construction machinery within our cities to kind of support the landscapes. And she would come and install like a huge crane on the crater, basically the crater that is in the Krater. And she will transform this, this crane in a way that the crane would be seeding around, basically the seeds and the soil and trying to support the landscape of Krater, which is normally more like gravelly and nature has hardship to kind of establish itself on the ground because the soil is lacking. So she did this performative act of, kind of, yeah, inviting the public to operate the crane and to see, to see that part of the Krater. So in that sense, I would also think ecological stewardship could happen in myriad unexpected and artistic ways.

**Louis VI** 18:52

Amazing. Allison, you was kind of mentioning about some of the spaces you're particularly interested in, and parks and roadways is one that you highlighted. I'm interested to know what that nature is a creative collaborator, and how that applies to roadways, or what's the context you're thinking for roadways.

**Allison O'Connor** 19:11

The way that our funding works is that 1% of municipal infrastructure development is allocated towards art. So let's say there is a roadway that's being built or redesigned, rebuilt, etc, 1% of their overall construction budget goes towards art. And so what we're able to do is either put artwork within that context of that road, if it is appropriate, so if there is people using that space, or if there's ways that we think that you know, vehicle traffic could engage with the artwork, which is tricky because it could lead to, you know, more dangerous things. But often what we do is we're able to bring the funding into different spaces, and that's often where we see funding via being allocated to green spaces instead of along road race. But if it's a project. Street, for example, if we're in talking about our downtown core, and we really want, you know, pedestrian engagement, and that's when the artwork would be put there. But predominantly we look at, where are the people, and how can they engage with the artwork? And that's where we're able to put these, these artworks. It really is important for me to note as well that we in Ottawa are on the unceded Algonquin Anishinaabe territory, and so we work with the Anishinabe to, you know, help guide some of the work that we do. Because there is no, you know, there is, we have an entire policy on engagement with the Algonquin Anishinaabe. But I, you know, think that there's also a huge environmental aspect to that. So there is, you know, justice for Indigenous peoples. You can't separate that from environmental justice as well, because those two are so interlinked.

**Louis VI** 21:00

Yeah, you got me out here clicking my fingers, because it's, I think the, you know, the Indigenous stewardship aspect is that one, you know, if everyone listened to Indigenous stewardship, we wouldn't probably be in the places that we are, climatically, anywhere in the world. And it is that also that second part of definition, which I think we've all been slightly speaking to indirectly, but redefining what art is and what nature is. And you know, particularly so I have a lot more experience. I've got a lot of friends that are Quechua Indigenous from the so-called Ecuadorian Amazon. There's no definition, or separate definition for the word for nature from humans. It's the same word. So then you apply that to art as well. And art doesn't necessarily, as you both have been saying, need to be human made. So do you think there's a one of the biggest, maybe creative challenges to creative climate leadership is, is redefining some of the language and redefining even definitions of things. So, you know, there's some of your work. Gaja is, is amazing that you've taken things that are seen as invasive plants, like Japanese Knotweed, where, you know, most building sites, engineers will be freaking out about it, but you've decided to make paper out of it, is one of the challenges you finding, actually, just redefining where that creativity can even come from? Yeah.

**Gaja Mežnarić Osole** 22:39

I guess, like, yeah, what you're saying, the need to kind of reinvent, also, the language that we use is, like, really, really important part of the work that we do. For example, you know, again, referring to the invasive plants. Obviously, the naming is not helpful in, you know, kind of inviting other kinds or other ways of relating with this new kind of ecologies or plant, yeah, human, plant relations. So in that regards, for example, for us, the word feral is something that is very interesting to use, because, in a way, it kind of refers to something that used to be cultivated and went wild, and somehow, in this, in this manner, we could also see our practice, because as designers and architects and other like practitioners who kind of went out of, let's say, kind of mainstream positions that were given to us or that were offered to us, and kind of reinvent also what our roles could be. So this kind of feralality is also, I think also, is also a way of allowing us to align with this kind of new world, multi species world that is emerging worth mentioning that we live in times of greenwashing bicycle and, you know, where it's like sustainability and also, maybe slowly regeneration started to be somehow, yeah-

**Louis VI** 24:13

I mean, even growth, you know, growth should be a, should be a really positive circular thing. And growth is just applied to economics, really, and is usually pretty damn destructive.

**Gaja Mežnarić Osole** 24:25

Exactly. So I think, like one way of kind of, yeah, going out is also to kind of reinvent the language that we use and try to distance from certain practices that we don't want to align with.

**Louis VI** 24:37

There's one thing I've asked a few times through this that I do love asking, and it's slightly out of the realms, but because this all comes back to our love of nature, and is there a place in the world that you think of that, when you think of nature, that is like a special place to you, that kind of redefines it?

**Gaja Mežnarić Osole** 24:58

I mean, I feel like I will be repeating myself. It's also obvious, maybe the answer of Yeah, putting forward Krater.

**Louis VI** 25:06

Will you describe it a bit for the audience?

**Gaja Mežnarić Osole** 25:09

Yeah. So Krater is spreading across 18,000 square metre piece of land that used to be obviously a construction site. And I think during the 30 Years, there were only, like two really important interventions that would happen on the site. One was that they would dig out the gravel to build the residential neighbourhood next to the site. So there is a huge crater, after which also the site got its name that is, luring in the site and creating its very special of landscape. And then in 2017 the municipality, sorry, the state, decided to mow down basically like everything that started to grow in the last years and accepted the big trees so in the past, yeah, let's say five years or more, a really beautiful pioneering ecology emerged out of this, which means, I don't know it's full of biodiversity. It's full of wilderness, in a way, but it's also kind of full of cultural activities, I would say, because there are three mobile containers placed in the site that hold three workshops around which people engage with bio materials and kind of, yeah, producing events and cultural events. And some people also would use site as cultural venue. We would also organise music events there that would be more like sound to the ecology in this way, like it would be ambiental music that would be normally happening there, not to disturb the Yeah, I guess the inhabitants of the site too much. We have also installed nesting boxes on the side bee hotels. There is a tree nursery. There is a greenhouse place. So it's, yeah, it's a very particular kind of an, I don't even want to call it garden, that I think creates quite a lot of excitement.

**Louis VI** 27:25

Allison how do you…what do you think for your space? Do you… have you got a nature space?

**Allison O'Connor** 27:31

I'm trying to think of a way to describe it that's not stereotypically Canadian. I live by a wetlands, like by a marsh, kind of swamp area. And it's essentially, it used to be a forest, but because of the large population of beavers, it is was flooded, and it the forest died, but it is now, you know, a wetlands, and you know, you see the remnants of the forest. It's really beautiful, and it's really lively. What I find is really, you know, what characterises it as such a natural place is that I cannot access it. It is its own place, you know? I mean, I could try and trudge through but it's really alive and its own place. And it's really, you know, it's literally constructed by beavers. It is. It has like retaining walls. It's that's all huge, sorry, all nature animal made, if it's almost a sentence, space for them, one of the beauties of it is that it's been cold enough that it has frozen over. And so we're able to finally go into those spaces. And it feels like such a privilege as kind of like a guest exploring this marshland, because I can now walk on the frozen, frozen parts and see, you know, what they've been doing, what they've been constructing, and then also just seeing all of the tracks in the snow and how alive this space is, and it's completely, completely untouched by humans. So I don't know how this, you know, plays into everything that I've just said about collaboration, but it's really lovely to see that there are still some untouched spaces and be able to feel like a guest in a natural space.

**Louis VI** 29:13

But that is collaboration, I guess, because, you know, that's allowing beavers back in to do what they do best, which is this beautiful natural engineering that massively increases the biodiversity. And people might say, oh, but the forest died, but the biodiversity, I can guarantee, will be much, much higher. I'm big proponent for bringing back the beaver to the UK, which is starting to happen, and people are starting to see the benefits, but we're very, very far behind where Canada is in terms of that. So, yeah, but we haven't got much time left to be honest. We've got to end it here. But before we go, some people will have been familiar that have been listening to this. Hopefully they've been listening to a few of these and starting to get an idea what creative climate leadership is. Yes, but for others, it will be a very fresh concept. So right now, to finish off, you've got the floor for the people that are listening. What's one thing you'd ask the person listening right now to do next?

**Gaja Mežnarić Osole** 30:15

I don't know. I think for me, it would be just to kind of keep on doing and believing in the work that they do. Because I think we live in a very particular climate, at the moment, political climate, but also planetary climate. So in this sense, I think, like, yeah, it's becoming more and more difficult to work on the matters that we work at least like from the position that I'm speaking from. So I would just encourage people to kind of pursue and insist and continue the work that they do and find, yeah, a lot as much allies across the planet, to kind of make them feel that they're not alone.

**Allison O'Connor** 30:57

Yeah I think I would say the same to artists, especially those who are looking to work in public art, to really keep doing what they're doing, and to also look into different sectors. You know, we have the STEM, which is now expanded to STEAM sector, which brings in together a variety of different, you know, scientific and engineering mechanics that these are all kind of tools to be able to use to be able to tackle this larger issue. And public art is a great way for artists, not only artists, but variety of different disciplines, to connect with the public. You know, art has a way of being accessible, and especially public art, because it's the goal is to be accessible, and it's a great platform to be able to speak about subjects, and then also create a feedback loop so that the public can then connect with you or connect with the subject matter. So really, as Gaja beautifully said, Just keep doing what you're doing, and know that there are people advocating for the type of work that you're doing out there, and also there are people that are looking to collaborate with you, to bring any you know vision to life.

**Louis VI** 32:16

Wasn't that interesting that it was, it was so about space that was like much more of a different approach to the whole idea of creative climate leadership. It was about providing, almost like a public service, to let people interact with an idea. And I really liked that. I thought that was interesting and allowing, you know the fact that nature, just allowing nature in, is repairing itself and also allowing people to experience art in a different way, and changing, redefining what the experience of art even means.

**Farah Ahmed** 32:54

I think so often when we think about nature, and this is the point about us being a part of it, and they're not as you, as you sort of talked about in the podcast. They're not being this boundary between us and nature means that we have to think about the spaces that we inhabit in a really different way. We can't think about urban spaces as devoid of nature and the wild in this separate way. You know, it has to be part of this, this constant reciprocal approach to space.

**Louis VI** 33:30

And they were both very much talking about urban spaces and making cities not just more livable for humans, but more livable for them, more than humans. And I think it was really interesting how, I guess no government is perfect, obviously, but I felt quite inspired by what Allison was saying about, you know, the municipal government there, and how much attention they're putting to creativity and injecting creativity, whether it's artists in residence or just the approach to each element. I think each element, she said, of even projects, needs to have a 1% go towards art. I mean, that's pretty mad. That's radical, that's pretty radical. Yeah, and, and it's funny because she was working from that aspect, and then Gaja was really working very much from the community, kind of grassroots up aspect. It was quite an interesting contrast.

**Farah Ahmed** 34:32

Yeah and you know, what I really loved about some of what Gaja is doing is that it's also about taking places that are forgotten or have very difficult histories. And we don't think so much, certainly I don't about the difficult histories of all of the buildings in the landscape around us. There's a lot and taking those and kind of repairing the trauma of that a little bit through allowing nature back in, and this idea of repairing the space also kind of repairs our relationship with one another.

**Louis VI** 35:09

God that's deep. I didn't even think about that until now. That's a really good point you picked up on. Yeah, I guess, yeah. Like she mentioned, from, you know, buildings that have lasted since the war, and like, even, like our buildings from occupying forces, and what that means to people seeing them. And then, you know, you have that, you know that can apply to everywhere you are. I mean, there's, you know, if you walk through certain parts of central London, like around Regent Street, you know, all that money to build all those above the shops, it's kind of quite uniform white buildings. That's all comes from money from the slave trade. And, you know, people that know that, that that is something that kind of weighs on you and nature does have this, you know, I know we're obvious proponents of nature, but nature does have this way of transforming that relationship, like you say.

**Farah Ahmed** 35:57

I just want to get back and take it, take us a little bit out of this episode and look back over the whole series so far, we're halfway through. What do you make of the picture that's coming together for you?

**Louis VI** 36:09

So play, integrity, repair. Yeah, we've covered quite diverse and deep topics, but I'm keen to know where we might go next. Any hints?

**Farah Ahmed** 36:21

Nope, you'll have to tune in next time to find out. Come and join us on Episode Four. Thanks for listening. Thanks for listening to conversations on creative climate leadership. It's a podcast from us here at Julie's Bicycle, a non profit, mobilising the arts and culture to take action on the climate, nature and justice crisis. Big thanks to our funders and partners who've supported the work of the creative Climate Leadership Network and the making of this podcast, Pro Helvetia and Stiftung Mercator Schweizfor CCL Switzerland, as well as the European cultural Foundation's culture of solidarity fund, and Porticus and a thanks to our host, Louis VI, who's a member of Earth percent, the music industry's Climate Foundation, who support JB's work on climate action with the music community. Thanks for listening.