

36

Abundant Futures

**Building Equity
in a Divided World**



create national development
agency for collaborative arts

Create's work has always been to support artists, academics and activists working in community contexts to tackle important social issues. While the principles of this work remain largely the same, the context in which it takes place is ever-evolving. Our upcoming Networking event, held in partnership with Leitrim County Council Arts Office and Cork City Council Arts Office, titled *Socially Engaged Practice: Building Equity in a Divided World*, seeks to address systemic inequities, sharing artist, researcher and community perspectives on building community in a time of heightened division.

In advance of this event, we invited artist Dana Olărescu to reflect on the contemporary issues of divisive information and the division of communities and to discuss how collaborative socially engaged artists can navigate these challenges in their work.

Dana is a socially engaged artist working at the intersection of installation, performance, and social design, who focuses on challenging minority exclusion and environmental injustice. Through participatory methodologies that democratise access to art and knowledge, she aims to give underserved migrant groups and people habitually excluded from decision-making processes the agency to become active co-producers of culture.

Front Cover:
Foraging for The Green Rope by William Bock
as part of Abundant Futures 2024.
Photo by Dana Olărescu

Abundant Futures

Building Equity in a Divided World

Dana Olărescu

My long-term creative projects stem from previous encounters with a location, with an in-depth understanding of local challenges, and with connections made with people who are bearing the brunt of immigration policies. Back in 2022, I first travelled to Jersey for the 'Home' residency commissioned by ArtHouse Jersey, a project aiming to engage with the three largest diaspora groups on the island: Portuguese, Polish, and Romanian. Working alongside two other artists over six weeks, we each connected with our respective communities, and created individual pieces of work that celebrated the contribution that each of our communities made to island life.

I am a Romanian-born and London-based socially engaged artist, and the Romanian community in Jersey immediately welcomed me, immersing me into their own island experiences. In stark contrast to this warm welcome, I learned about their limited rights on Jersey.

Jersey is an island country and self-governing British Crown Dependency near the coast of North-West France. To control population, Jersey operates a system of registration which restricts the right to live and work on the island according to certain requirements. New migrants need permission to work and can only do so in the hospitality, care, or agricultural industries. Five years are necessary to become 'entitled to work' anywhere else. Ten years are required to be able to buy property, permanently settle on the island, or even have children - migrants can only rent from certain 'licenced' landlords who do not accept children or pets.

My resulting works, a series of 40 posters and a large-scale 'Immigration Game' critically engaged with the policies that guide people's lives and movements on and beyond Jersey, and celebrated the contributions that these people have brought to the broader society. Following this work, ArtHouse Jersey invited me to lead a long-term socially engaged project "Abundant Futures" that breaks down the barriers of the gallery and engages with diverse migrant communities based on the needs I identified through my previous research. *Abundant Futures* is rooted in my practice's efforts to explore and address issues of social and environmental justice. By connecting with relevant stakeholders and amplifying existing knowledge on the island, we aim to make it much easier to counter misinformation.

According to the most recent UK census, the population of Jersey totalled 103,267 on 21 March 2021¹. Twenty-one percent of that figure were born overseas, with the largest demographics from Portugal/Madeira (8%) and Poland (3%) followed by France (1%) and Romania, South Africa, India, The Philippines, Germany, Zimbabwe, Venezuela, Australia, Thailand, and the United States of America.

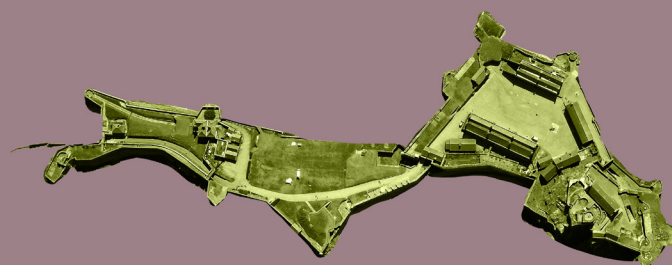
Jersey is expected to be particularly affected by the climate crisis, facing increased risks of coastal flooding, erosion, and soil degradation. The Royal Jersey potato, while a valuable export, has contributed to declining soil health due to a reliance on monoculture farming. Increased yields of the Jersey potato require the use of imported synthetic fertilisers (current usage is at 96%)² which pollutes drinking water. These fertilisers come at a high cost: first, farmers pay to apply the fertiliser, and then Jersey Water pays to remove it.

1 Government of Jersey. (2021). *2021 Census data*. Open Data Jersey.
<https://opendata.gov.je/dataset/2021-census/resource/b4c15e10-5028-433b-acfa-224675b9b0f8>

2 Government of Jersey. (2018). *A brief review of Jersey's food security*.

"In 1972 the States set up a special committee with the object of protecting the Island against 'immigration and unemployment'".

- Mark Boleat in *Jersey's Population: A History*



High Value residency poster by Dana Olărescu.
Part of Home exhibition, ArtHouse Jersey, Capital House, 2022

“Abundant Futures uses the intersection of climate, migration, and labour justice as a catalyst for cultural change”

The local community primarily depends on mainland food imports, leading to empty supermarket shelves when ferries are unable to sail due to storms. Food costs are also considerably higher than in the UK, partly due to the 5% Goods and Services Tax (GST) applied to all food items.

As in many other places, there is a common belief that experts from abroad will miraculously solve these challenges. However, various informal initiatives led by migrants on the island, such as soil regeneration, crop diversification, and the creation of food businesses, are not yet recognised as antidotes. Absurdly, despite having limited rights in Jersey, migrants are often portrayed by the media as burdens on local resources.

“The five years [work permit] is in place for every nationality before they can draw on benefits, otherwise we could be in the same mess as the UK, with boats of people coming over from St Malo because they could get benefits as soon as they land.”³

Such tropes inform public discourse through misinformation.

Abundant Futures uses the intersection of climate, migration, and labour justice as a catalyst for cultural change. How can we have a slow, iterative transformation of the entangled systems that govern people's lives while also acting promptly, taking up space, amplifying voices and creating platforms for these learnings to be disseminated widely? The project interrogates how we can draw on the existing knowledge of diverse minorities on the island, their lived experiences in other homelands, and co-build and amplify the 'local' through global voices and cultural diversity. How can we ensure these changes are not temporary, instead imagining futures we could all indiscriminately inhabit?

What is the potential for a small island to become a testing ground or a prototype for active engagement with migrant communities with the climate crisis and food justice as a central topic?

To ensure the project thrives, the right conditions were established from the outset. I am fortunate to have Dijana Raković, a senior producer at Counterpoints Arts, an organisation that supports art by and about refugees and migrants in the UK and internationally, as my mentor. Dijana will be checking in with me regularly throughout the project to help keep me on track.

³ Barron, S. (January, 2022). All nationalities have been welcomed. *Jersey Evening Post*.



Food politics workshop as part of Abundant Futures, ArtHouse Jersey Capital House 2024. Photo by Scott Evans

Imagined as a shared platform, *Abundant Futures* relies on substantial contributions from artists and experts on migration who explore the intersectionality of environmental struggles. Over the three-year period of this project, regular visits are scheduled, with artists bringing existing projects to Jersey and engaging with specific demographics, or creating pieces especially responding to the context. Concurrently, I am running workshops and interventions in diverse community spaces, including diaspora shops, community and youth centres, housing associations, and at Capital House, ArtHouse Jersey's art gallery space in town. These locations are especially chosen so that people feel they truly inhabit their own space, highlighting and honouring people's diverse insights and skills they bring from their homelands.

For our inaugural workshop, we delved into each individual's understanding of food politics. Participants from Zimbabwe, South Africa, the UK, Indonesia, and Ireland brought ingredients that reminded them of 'home' and collaborated to create a salad. The group expressed passion for addressing food access disparities, reducing food waste, ensuring access to culturally appropriate food, and advocating for the right to food. While they expressed scepticism about the possibility of change in Jersey, they expressed eagerness to participate in a working group. At the Little Parliament, a platform run by Jersey Youth Service for students ages 10 and 11 to discuss issues affecting young people on the island, participant students were passionate about equal distribution of food across Jersey, and are keen to organise a culturally diverse Food Justice Festival in 2026.

“It is through simple encounters rooted in generosity and abundance that minds begin to change”.

Lilly’s Mini Market serves as a central hub for the Thai community. Although primarily a food shop, it offers tables and seating where members of the community gather to socialise over drinks, food, or karaoke. Sometimes they simply share the space. During an impromptu workshop held in the shop, I encountered people eager to organise their own cultural events or engage more broadly in Jersey life. However, they are often held back by a lack of information about relevant funding and initiatives, as well as restrictive work schedules in the care industry.

Jersey lacks official hubs where people from various backgrounds can come together to build solidarity and power. Moreover, their demanding work schedules leave them with little to no leisure time to connect with one another. In the coming years, *Abundant Futures* will bring together these diverse demographics and encourage them to lead their own workshops, allowing them to be recognised as experts in the remarkable knowledge they possess.

To dispel some of the myths promoted by the media and politicians regarding migrants’ dependence on the state, in year one, we hosted a workshop on “Navigating migration ethically” by investigative journalist Ismail Einashe, supported by the International Cultural Centre. We are building towards a larger contribution in 2025, with Ismail delivering a training session for journalists to write more compassionately and accurately about migration issues.



Kaajal Modi workshop
at Jersey Museum as
part of *Abundant
Futures 2024*. Photo
by Karen Le Roy Harris

The first invited artist, Kaajal Modi, arrived in April to work on *Native Tongues*, looking at the politics of land, language, and biodiversity on Jersey. Jèrriais is the Jersey vernacular language, now only spoken by around 500 people. “The Earth Does Not Understand English” is the English rendition of a Jèrriais expression reflecting the alteration in land management practices following the influx of English settlers to the island from 1824 onward. These newcomers failed to integrate with the indigenous Jèrriais population, leading to shifts in traditional soil-tending methods. The Jèrriais community relied entirely on working with the land (the language incorporates vocabulary centred around land and nature), utilised seaweed (vraic) as fertiliser, and respected the changing seasons.

When I first visited Jersey in 2022, I learned about a 10-year-old Romanian girl who had won multiple Eisteddfod competitions in Jèrriais. Alongside her, an entire generation of migrant children are learning this language to connect with the island and foster a sense of belonging.



Participants twisting William Bock's Green
Rope as part of Abundant Futures 2024.
Photo by Scott Evans

Kaajal, a multidisciplinary designer, artist, and creative researcher is bringing together older Jèrriais speakers and migrant children who are learning the language, to discuss vernacular ways of caring for the soil. The aim is to strengthen the connections between the two demographics, practise the language, and unearth vital knowledge for Jersey's soil resilience.

Through partnership with L'Office du Jèrriais, Kaajal has been working with six children who have been taken out foraging and learning about seaweeds as a way to start the conversation about the climate crisis, and 'migrant' plant species. Some of these seaweeds are new to the Jersey coastline and lack names in Jèrriais. Kaajal conducted a session where Ari, Arya, Aiden, Kevin, Raphael, and Thomas named these new seaweeds, and their chosen names will be reviewed by the Société Jèrriais for inclusion in the official Jèrriais dictionary. An extraordinary meeting is set for later in the year, and the children are thrilled to have contributed to the naming process.

Colonial tools of domination often begin with the exclusion of language; emphasising English as the aspirational language teaches children that belonging requires rejecting their native tongue. For many native speakers, Jèrriais is closely associated with stigmatisation and trauma; Since the 1940s, Jèrriais was forbidden in schools, as it was considered a 'peasant language,' and students were forced to learn English. A native Jèrriais speaker shared with us how they were "given the cane" in school for speaking the language.

The negative connotations surrounding Jèrriais also led many native speakers to 'forget' the language; they chose not to pass it down to their children, aiming for them to integrate and secure better jobs in town rather than work on farms. By bringing together this young group of eager learners and native speakers, we hope to heal some of that trauma by revitalising the language and highlighting the role of land guardians who use vernacular methods of caring for nature.

To connect people who might not typically come together, I invited William Bock, a multi-disciplinary artist based in South West Ireland, to bring his *Tarraingt / Green Rope* project to Jersey. After a week of orientation, during which he connected with local fishermen, explored potential site-specific locations, and engaged with people interested in participating, we dedicated a week in July to creating a long rope made of grass in a public space. The piece uses the act of Sugán rope making (an Irish straw rope) to bring people, nature and conversation together across cultural and social barriers. Central to the making of the rope was also documenting the process. Four local people with a connection to migration in Jersey were selected to use their phones to capture some of these moments during the creation. This footage will be edited into a short film to be shown in 2025.

William's days in Jersey were divided between setting up a stall in the Fish Market, where passersby accidentally stumbled upon the activity, and working in a public space off the main road in the town centre. Four people are always required for the twisting, which naturally encourages conversation among participants. Several people met allies, some for the first time since moving to Jersey. One particular nurse, originally from Congo and who began working on the island eight months ago, expressed that for the first time she felt able to converse with people without feeling prejudice or judgement from others. Shockingly, care work remains a setting where nurses of colour sometimes face racial comments or even have patients refuse their care due to their race.

Over the four days of twisting, circa 800 people came to take part, glance at, or simply observe the process, often sparking conversations about nature and natural materials, migration, cultural habits, displacement, and much more. The owner of a fish stall in the market greeted us on our first day and was intrigued by our use of the word 'migrant.' He strongly expressed his concern about migrants taking resources away from the local population, despite having arrived as a land-worker from England in the 1980s himself. He had endured extremely harsh treatment as an 'outsider,' including sleeping in shacks instead of proper accommodation, working long days, and being unable to rent a property without his Jersey-born wife as a guarantor. Despite these challenges, he firmly believed that hard work alone could lift one out of poverty, overlooking the systems of exploitation that trap people in cycles of hardship.

He mentioned the local phrase, "There is a boat tomorrow," which is less commonly used these days but historically sent a clear message: if someone disapproves of the working conditions, they are free to leave immediately.

Through honest conversation, we were able to address these opinions and dispel them with facts drawn from the experiences of current communities facing similar struggles. In small communities, where misinformation often goes unchallenged, opinions can easily be mistaken for facts. In my experience, an effective way to bridge gaps between contrasting views is to create space for unbiased sharing, non-judgmental listening, and presenting alternatives. It is through simple encounters rooted in generosity and abundance that minds begin to change. Sometimes through an act as simple as making a rope together. By the end of the conversation, he expressed his gratitude for being listened to and for the clarifications on some of those issues.

“What is the potential for a small island to become a testing ground for active engagement with migrant communities with the climate crisis and food justice as a central topic?”

Above all, *Abundant Futures* aims to influence policy so that misinformation no longer has a place on the island, and we are fortunate to be supported by Deputy Raluca Kovacs, a Romanian-born politician, who will translate some of our findings into recommendations for the States of Jersey. Mariana Pinto Leitao Pereira, a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Heritage for Global Challenges Research Centre, will also join us in 2025 to convert some of our collaborators’ lived experiences into valuable data that will support these recommendations. Other artistic approaches include Olha Prymak’s Kupala Festival which showcases Ukrainian pagan rituals, and Fozia Ismail’s project on camel milk which will allow us to continue the work on healing and connection between different demographics.

During William Bock’s final rope walk from port to port, which involved 17 people carrying the 80-metre long rope, a participant reminded us that since we are all connected by the rope, our movements either disrupt or support everyone else’s. This concept extends to building connections between different diaspora groups; only through togetherness and solidarity can we withstand issues, challenge, and advocate for changes which will ultimately achieve benefits for the entire island.



The Green Rope walk led by William Bock as part of Abundant Futures 2024. Photo by Dana Olărescu

In Short WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO...

In August, we were delighted to offer **'Making Odd-Kin'** a one day workshop with artists LennonTaylor, hosted by the KinShip project in Tramore Valley Park, Cork. This workshop acted as an exchange of thoughts, ideas and actions, for socially engaged artists and those from other related sectors who are interested in the call for creative social interactions to address climate change.

We have been working on *What is an Island? Towards a Patchwork Pedagogy for a World Archipelago* for a number of years, with partners in TU Dublin and Uillinn: West Cork Arts Centre. We launched this publication at IMMA in September, as part of the Earth Rising Festival. Get in touch if you want to find out more or get your hands on a copy.

Eascair was a cultural event celebrating the contribution of Afro-Irish artists to Ireland's rich cultural scene, with a focus on people of the African diaspora in the arts. This event, held in April, was led by dance artists **Karen Aguiar** (Project Manager/Event Producer) and **Tobi Balogun** (Artistic Director/Curator). Eascair showcased contemporary work in dance, featuring film screenings, exhibition, and food sharing as well as in-depth conversations focusing on collaborations and how traditions are carried through the community and into new contemporary forms and spaces.

Coming soon

Create's annual networking event brings together those working in or entering the field of collaborative, socially engaged art. This year we are excited to offer the event as part of a two-day conference on socially engaged practice titled **Socially Engaged Practice: Building Equity in a Divided World**, in partnership with Leitrim County Council Arts Office and Cork City Council Arts Office. We welcome artists, researchers, community group representatives, activists, arts managers and more to join us on **Wednesday 6th and Thursday 7th of November 2024** at The Dock Arts Centre, Carrick on Shannon, Co. Leitrim. The conference provides an opportunity to meet, learn, discuss, critique and engage with current concerns in social practice.

Check out our website for the full programme and to book your place.

Welcome to Create News

This is the thirty-sixth edition of Create News.

Create News is published twice yearly in spring and autumn. It is sent free of charge, features a guest writer or writers and offers the latest information on Create events and services. If you do not wish to receive further editions, please write or email us at info@create-ireland.ie. If you would like to receive a personal copy of Create News please email info@create-ireland.ie and include details of name, address and postcode.

The views expressed in each issue of Create News are those of the individual authors, and do not reflect those of Create as an organisation.

Create

2 Curved Street
Dublin 2
D02 PC43
01 473 6600

www.create-ireland.ie



create national development
agency for collaborative arts



funding
the arts