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Public Diplomacy Through Networks of Care: The Case of Platforms Project ^[1]

In his book, *From Art to Politics: How Artistic Creations Shape Political Conceptions*, Murray Edelman argues that “art should be recognized as a major and integral part of the transaction that engenders political behavior”.

Highlighting art as a political act, the Hellenic Parliament has hosted the international exhibition of the independent art scene *Platforms Project 2024* in the *Public Tobacco Factory*, its historic building located in the center of Athens, Greece. From October 10-13, 2024, under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, 64 visual art platforms from 25 countries were presented to a broader audience, creating a "living" interactive artistic mosaic. More than 900 artists from Greece, Spain, UK, Sweden, France, Denmark, Netherlands, Cyprus, Poland, Spain, Russia, Slovenia, Kazakhstan, Bulgaria, Austria, Israel, Turkey, USA, Ukraine, Canada, Finland, Armenia, Italy, Latvia, and Germany exhibited their work, not as individuals but as “collaborative platforms,” celebrating culture with a multifaceted parallel program. What truly differentiates the whole experience was the constant presence of all artists of the platforms next to their artworks, throughout the mega event. All of them were open to conversations with visitors, allowing them to gain unique insights to better understand contemporary art through their interaction.

The concept of care refers to the ability to understand yourself and others, to listen, to connect, to communicate, to interact, to co-create, to find a joint solution. Care is a foundational notion of public diplomacy through the lenses of both sharp and soft power. The special issue of *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* on “*Diplomacy and the Duty of Care*” covers care-injected, citizens-centered diplomatic practices of Ministries of Foreign Affairs and embassies, taking into account all challenges in international relations. The “duty of care” is a concept understood in the light of the states’ security agenda while its “inversion” refers to the willingness of citizens to help the authorities deliver care. That inversion of care brings us closer to a humanity-centered public diplomacy , as described by R.S.Zaharna, broadening the context within which the term *public diplomacy* is viewed. Seen in this light, the cultural sector plays a crucial role in establishing a care mindset and empowering all actors involved to uphold and promote care-related values.

Since caring is sharing resources, information, emotions or ideas, the discussion about care through listening, informing, advocating, connecting, and empowering people is inherent to public diplomacy theory and practice. Researchers leveraging a corporate approach to public diplomacy stress the role of self-interest for economic networks to develop sustainable solutions, acting as political agents without representing a state but balancing corporate interests with society values. Among the key issues examined in that approach, the long-term relationships, network communication and trust are kept to the fore. However, the role of emotions as regulators in decision making is equally discussed by sociologists and anthropologists in a way that is comparable to that of preferences and ultimately serve interests in a different way.

Networking and knowledge-sharing with artists and creative minds serve as a mirror reflecting people's perceptions for the real world and bringing forward new realities. In line with John Brown, it is not self-evident that art will perform public diplomacy miracles but it should not be on governments' radar screen on a regular basis. Being a tool to inspire and connect states, organizations, and publics, to co-create knowledge so as to meet the needs of humanity, and to be used as an additional pathway to achieve well-being, art embraces care whose power is transformative. Care is closely intertwined with emotion and empathy, both essential for the practice of public diplomacy. Effective public diplomacy is empathetic public diplomacy.

In this context, the Platforms Project brings care both as a challenge and a set of values to the attention of a wide public, building on a relational approach to address global issues of humanity. Platforms as the following are networks of care freely expressing themselves through art to draw attention to sensitive issues such as overpopulation, poverty, inequality, economic, social, and environmental well-being, resilience to climate change or sustainable living as well as empower people to become part of the solution.

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The Trauma Jigsaw project by the Encounters from Greece is a photographic installation that presented the journey towards healing and the reconstitution of the whole as both a deeply personal and collective process, reflecting the dual nature of trauma and recovery: "one that divides and polarizes us, yet simultaneously and conversely connects and unites us" argue the artists.

The Tupajumi Foundation supported by the Centrum Beelden Kunst presented the artworks of eight artists from the Netherlands to promote contemporary art through processes of interaction and engagement emphasizing dynamic participation between artists and communities.

The Go Game Project based on the rules of a strategic board game that originated in China

(known as Weiqi), is created by seven immigrant artists from the former USSR, now living in Greece, Spain, Russia, Bulgaria, Austria, Slovenia, and Kazakhstan, seeking to strike a balance between internal and external contradictions through dialogue and co-creation with the public.

Last but not least, inclusion and diversity were the main axes of Studio 44 from Sweden in order to represent artistic freedom and advocate for co-creation, innovation, and platform art as a democratic cornerstone in society.

As Michalis Argyrou notes in the Platforms Project 2024 catalogue, “This is the first time in the twelve-year history of the Platforms Project that the event itself is being presented as a visual conceptual work, an installation that brings the independent contemporary art scene into dialogue within the absolute institutional context of the Hellenic Parliament.” In a word, these networks of care in Greece not only remain unnoticed but reasonably receive the attention they deserve.
