

Report Art Futures Critical Friends meeting in Athens 6th and 7th October 2023



Introduction

The Critical Friends initiative was proposed by the Art Futures Board to bring together a group of individuals, leaders in the arts, culture and education that share friendly bonds and a belief in developing an ongoing conversation. This is achieved through uniting their 'critical' mindsets in a structured space of trust and an annual live meeting, inspired by the fellowship programme. This concept was developed online with the Critical Friends during 2021 and in 2022 through the [first live meeting in Brussels](#).

This subsequently resulted in the [Art Futures Fellowship 2023](#). This process informed the programme of the second Critical Friends meeting in Athens in which twenty-six Critical Friends from thirteen countries participated in the meeting on the 6th and 7th October 2023.

Dynamic start

The programme started with a lunch in a traditional Greek restaurant that was open only for the Critical Friends. During the introduction round participants elaborated on what makes them 'critical' and on their professional background. Immediately enthusiastic friendly exchanges started during this lunch and continued for the rest of the two days.

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From the restaurant we crossed the road to the [National Museum of Contemporary Art Athens \(EMST\)](#). Katerina Gregos, Director EMST, welcomed the group and gave an inspirational introduction to the museum and her future ambitions for it, she also elaborated on the state of affairs of the Athens art scene today.

Stella Kourbana, curator of the 'Xenakis in Greece' exhibition gave a guided tour, after that the Critical Friends swarmed out to enjoy the museum.

Through a guided walk, organised by Georgios Papadopoulos (Art Futures Research Fellow), the Critical Friends went back to their hotel for a short rest. In the evening the key session took place in [SIC](#), the venue that hosted the residency.

Lars Ebert introduced the session and its speakers.

Research fellow Georgios Papadopoulos who guided the two [Fellows Tami Izko and Federico Claverino](#) during their stay in Athens, introduced the Fellows.



Tami and Federico explained how the idea behind The Crab's House came about, a metaphor for creating a home when you're always moving. An exhibition of the work was presented in SIC.



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Unique to the Art Futures Fellowship is that there is a pool of experts (the Critical Friends) available as mentors to the artists.

Keynote speech

Critical Friend **Ron Burnett**, President Emeritus of Emily Carr University of Art and Design and mentor for the Art Futures Fellows, spoke about *Ethics and Art Practices*.

Ron was building on the paper that Mary Ann DeVliegh presented to the Critical Friends in Brussels in 2022 titled: Solidarity—Hospitality—Responsibility—Respect which centred on the notion of “care ethics.”

Ron questioned: “*What does it mean to care?*”

Solidarity cannot be relativised or diluted. It cannot be contingent. Care and empathy must be given with a full heart, whatever the cost.

We must find ways of engaging in situations where the balance of power often sits with individuals and parties that don’t know how to care and actively subvert efforts to act fairly in situations of great complexity.”

Ron spoke about how artists now face nationalism and populism, exclusion and censorship. “*It is not just the artwork which promotes dialogue but rather the process and performance of communication and exchange which leaves traces of its intentions in the objects displayed and in the reactions of viewers.*”

As mentor of the Art Futures Fellows in their project, “The Crab’s House” Ron emphasised “*Tami and Federico use wax as a metaphor to explore how we identify our perceptions of space, time, and subject positioning. The use of candles carved and shaped, “exhibited, lit, and left to melt,” materialises the ambiguity of place”*

Tami and Federico brought a meal into their relationships with their participants as a central part of their project.

For Tami and Federico art becomes a site of research and investigation. In some senses, they are anthropologists, sociologists, and even political scientists exploring ways of living that might lead to new forms of social and cultural organization.

The work of Tami and Federico point towards artistic practices that acknowledge the need to communicate, act and promote new ways of commenting upon, and changing the landscape of art production and communication. Their approach is steeped in the ethics of care.

[hyperlink to speech](#)

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Critical Friend **Sarah Bennett**, Visiting Fellow at Kingston School of Art and also mentor of the Art Futures Fellows, reflected on Ron's contribution.

She mentioned that *after Ron was providing plenty of valuable input, Tami and Frederico contacted me, we talked through the possibilities for creating, what I think of as a 'pause' or an interlude, in a cyclical process of an art practice comprising: engagement; critical reflection; dialogue; production, and presentation.*

She stressed the urgency to reflect on how, arts students are best served by an arts education system. Sarah ended with stating *it is incumbent upon the Arts Futures selection panel, to continue to grant the residency to those artists, whose practice and approach is ethically aware, socially sensitive, and is care centred.*

[hyperlink to speech](#)

After answering questions and a discussion, the Critical Friends left for a dinner outside under the trees.



The next day we visited the artist collective Serapis who gave a meaningful explanation of how they developed their work.

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The visit was followed by a guided tour in the impressive building of the [Niarchos Foundation](#).

Next steps

On the last day discussion amongst the Critical Friends took place in three groups on the themes: *'Solidarity', 'Hospitality' and 'Responsibility'*, the key words introduced by Mary Ann DeVlieg during the Critical Friends meeting in Brussels last year and followed up by Ron Burnett in his speech.

Feedback from the three groups led to the discussion on future developments of the residency. A second residency in Zutphen, [Dat Bolwerck](#), and was presented to the Critical Friends. Interest from the field on the Call for the two residencies in 2024 was substantial and resulted in 350 applications from 73 countries (for the residency 2023 we received 170). The Critical Friends played a crucial role in the selection process and will continue to do so. The Critical Friends also play an important part for the Art Futures Fellows as mentors, this is a unique opportunity for the artist(s).

For the coming years Art Futures will make a connection between the residencies and aims to bring them together in an exhibition/event.

In 2024 the selected artist will spend 2 months in Athens in spring and 2 months in autumn in autumn. In January a zoom meeting will be organised with the Critical Friend and the selected artist to present the new project.

In November 2024 it is anticipated to organise a Critical Friends meeting in Zutphen.

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Participants in Athens

In person: Alain Ayers; Anna Ochmann; Carla Delfos; Chrissie Tiller; Cornelia Dümcke; Federico Clavarino; Frans Damman; Georgios Papadopoulos; Ian Muller; Ilídio Louro; Inês Bettencourt da Câmara; Jan Jaap Knol; Lars Ebert; Margarida Montenegro; Marlise van der Jagt; Mercedes Giovinazzo; Michael Defuster; Nina Scholtens; Peter Nelson; Ruth Jakobi; Sharon Kanach; Tami Izko

Online: Ben Hurkmans; John Butler; Ron Burnett; Sarah Bennet

A few reactions of participants:

'It was a true pleasure to get to meet all of you and to get to know some of you a bit more'

'You have managed to bring together some truly exceptional people, not only with great professional experience, but just wonderful, warm, open-minded people creating something really valuable together'

'I can genuinely say that I made many new friends, and that it was a most interesting and stimulating moment for reflection and discussion.'

'I really enjoyed my time with you and – God knows – I need these moments right now.'

'Athens was inspiring and you can account for further support.'

'For me it was an unforgettable opportunity to meet and discuss opinions with such inspiring groups. I returned home with a very positive energy and new ideas.'

