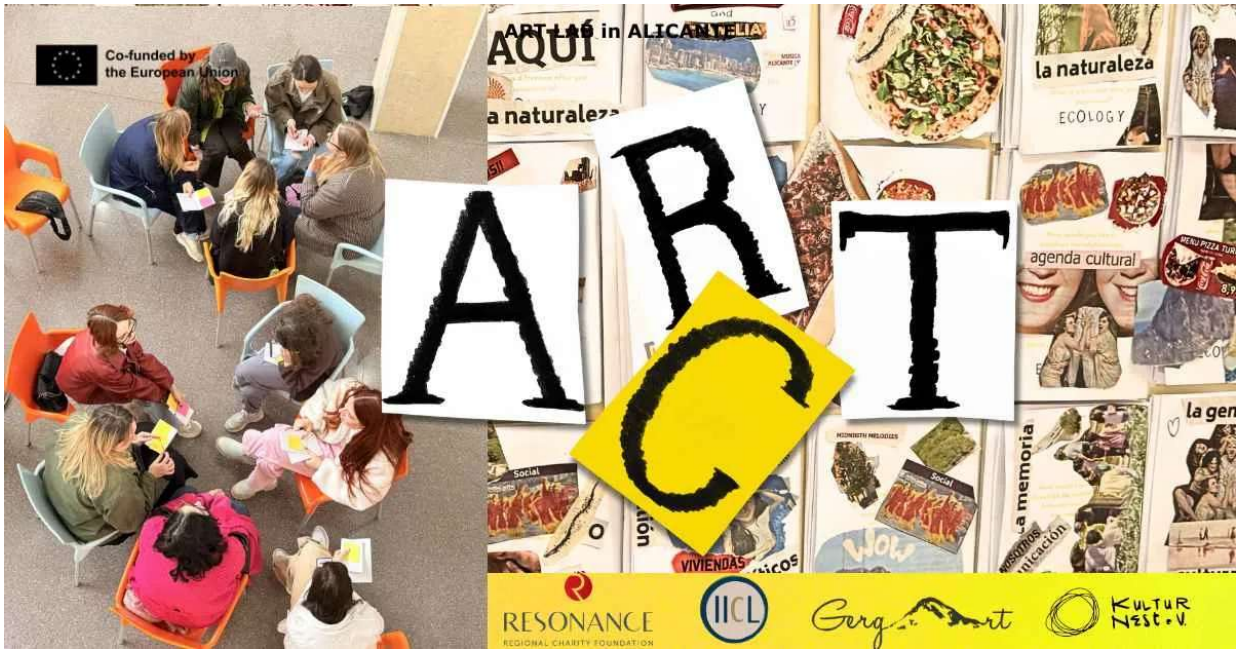
Blog | 17 July 2026

From ART to ACT: What CivicArt taught us about TOGETHERNESS

Why we chose art as our main language: warm data, togetherness, and the CivicArt project.

dagna GMITROWICZ



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We are living through several crises at once: economic, climate, political. But there is another one underneath, and we talk about it far less: a crisis of self-esteem, self-expression, and well-being. People are tired not only of what is happening to them, but of not being heard while it happens.

In November 2024, Resonance Charitable Foundation in Ukraine launched **CivicArt: Capacity-Building for Art-Based Civic Education** as lead partner, and invited three organisations to join: Gergart in Georgia, my own organisation, KulturNest e.V. in Germany, and the Association of International Initiatives for Cooperation Letur (IICL) in Spain. The project will close in September 2026. Being invited as partners rather than leading it ourselves hasn't made our commitment any smaller; we're in this with our full heart and our full work. And the partnership itself was not accidental. Two of the organisations involved work in countries currently under real pressure at home. We wanted partners who understood that art-based civic education is not a nice extra; it is sometimes the only language left when other channels close.

Why cold data was not enough?

How do you cope with a polycrisis using numbers alone? Statistics tell you what is happening. They rarely tell you how it feels to live inside it, or how the pieces- economy, environment, identity, relationships touch each other. This is why we looked at Nora Bateson's idea of **warm data**: information that stays connected to its context instead of being cut out of it. She doesn't say cold data is wrong. She says it isn't enough on its own, especially for anything alive.

Art and activism together is called artivism, and it is not a new idea. People across Europe have used it for years. What we tried to add in CivicArt was a path to get there on purpose: first research, mapping 22 European examples of art-based civic education; then a methodology guide and a competence model, the **CivicART Model**, naming five things a facilitator needs to be able to do holding space for expression, facilitate learning through creative practice, support young people's agency and voice, connect people, ideas and contexts, and reflect on impact.

What happened in Alicante?

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That training brought 26 youth workers, artists, and educators from Ukraine and Georgia to Alicante, Spain, for six days, with our team from KulturNest and our colleagues from IICL facilitating. The agenda was carefully built, session by session. But what mattered most was simpler: staying with whatever came up, in the moment.

Each person started with a personal zine, one word per letter of the alphabet, each word something true about them. By the second day, the zines stopped being private. Everyone added something to everyone else's, and the fragments became one shared collage, built from personal stories told through images.

On day three, I led a **warm data process** for the group. A container for warm stories, for different contexts to sit in the same room without needing to resolve into one answer. That same day was framed around "Care-Action," working directly with the competence model, so people weren't only talking about civic art; they were practising the skills to carry it home.

Then, on day four, five groups presented art pieces: performance, illustration, photography, film, stop-motion, each working with a different technique, independently. Every one of them landed on the same word: **togetherness**. One piece has stayed with me: a message to a penguin who had wandered off alone. *"Accept our support."*

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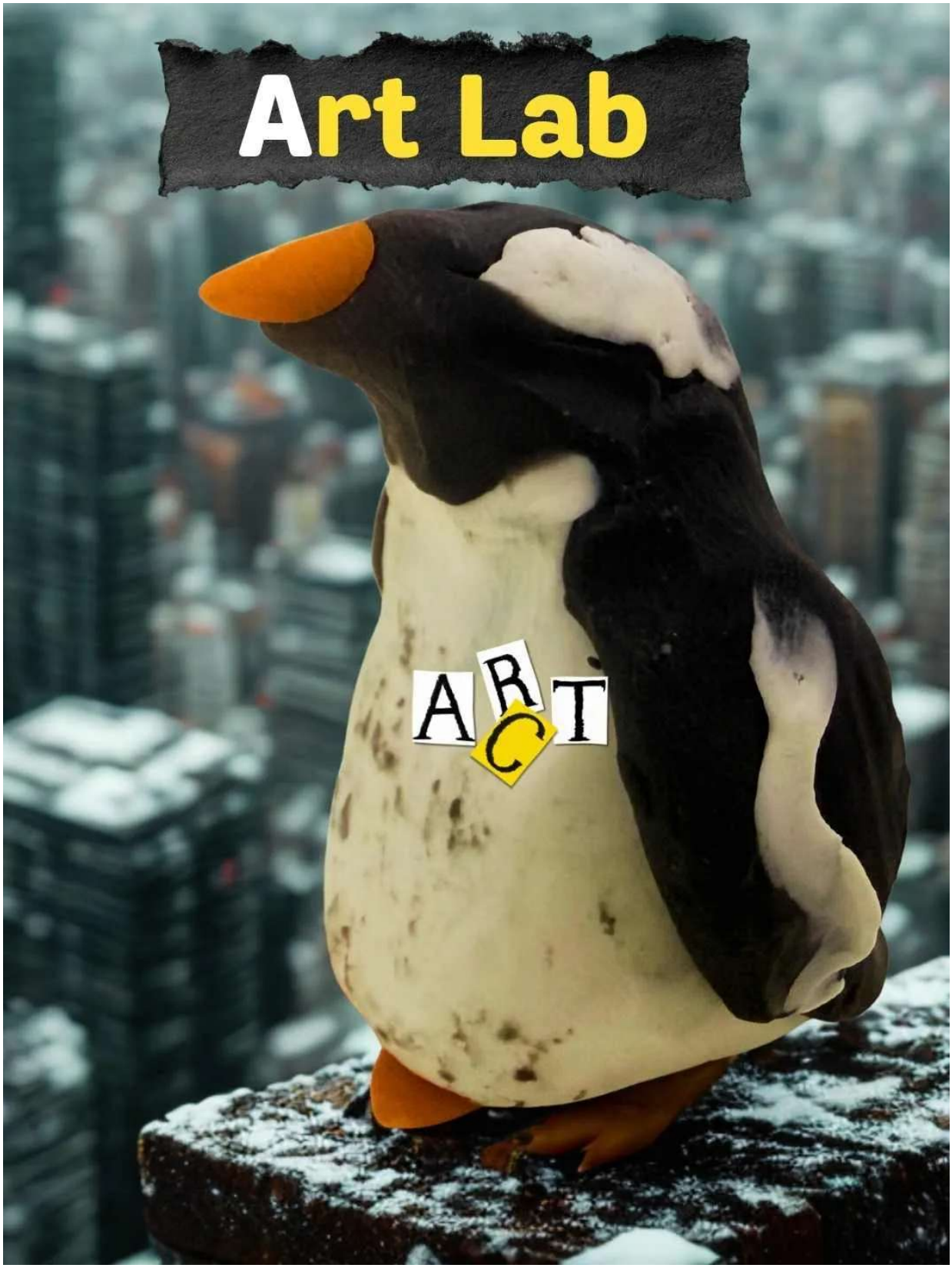

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Is togetherness a naive word to build a project around? Maybe, on paper. But when it comes out through art, it doesn't stay abstract. It becomes something people are willing to build with their hands once they get home.

Art strips away what doesn't matter!

I am an artist, an educator, a trainer, and the one who facilitates our warm data labs. Over time, I've noticed something. Art has a strange power to strip things away. It sets aside what is not alive,

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and leaves only what is warm.

When we resonate with a piece of art- music, an image, a performance, a poem, a book- we are resonating with something alive, something that sits beyond words and stays with us even when we can't name it. When we don't resonate, we simply don't notice it. It passes by.

So I'll say it plainly: when we use art to express something, we share more than we meant to share. We pass on energy, and that energy can wake up something in someone else, something that becomes alive for them too. This is why we keep coming back to art as a messenger. It's also what our organisation, KulturNest e.V., holds at the centre of its work: that art is the main language of communication, not a secondary one. The visual language, the vocal language, the language of smell, the language of the heart, of intuition, of imagination- these cross borders and cultures in a way words alone can't. Words come after. They are the addition, not the foundation.

This is also why we want to make the CivicArt Alliance formal, and why we're inviting you to join it now.

What comes next

Local activities are now happening across Ukraine and Georgia, carried forward under that same theme of TOGETHERNESS. We won't describe them here secondhand; they deserve to be seen directly, not summarised. Follow them as they happen on @civicart2025 on Instagram.

If you want to try any of this yourself, our Methodology Guide and Collection of Best Practices are free to use, at civicart.rcfres.org/library, released under Creative Commons so you can adapt them to your own setting.

We still don't know all the answers. We're not walking toward a fixed destination — just going step by step, together. It turns out that's not naïve at all. It might be the only honest way to move forward.

This article was written within the CivicArt project (2024–2026), co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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Themes (required)

CULTURE PARTICIPATION

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