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Knill's Magic 2.o: Underworlding War and Water

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Introduction

Conflict shatters infrastructure, yet seldom extinguishes the human impulse to play. Across time and geographies, children and adults have answered artillery, rising seas, and bureaucratic paralysis with improvised stages, lantern festivals, augmented-reality portals, and whispering drones. This paper traces that stubborn aesthetic metabolism from a World War II cellar on the Swiss–German frontier, recalled by expressive-arts pioneer Paolo J. Knill, to contemporary workshops in Rafah, Port Vila, Qelekuro, Jenin, Kherson, and beyond. By reading Knill's "Magic Underworld" alongside digital and climate-era counterparts, the study argues that communal art-making functions as a mobile shelter in which logistical attunement, technological fragility, and collective imagination converge to restore psychosocial bandwidth. Within that shelter three analytic lenses crystallise: distributed rehearsal (the fragile yet repeatable interval in which participants pace catastrophe and rehearse alternative tempos), infrastructural doubleness (the oscillation that lets one scaffold survival and imagination at once), and durational poetics (the stretching of creative gestures so meaning accrues through repetition rather than climax). The genealogy of these ideas begins in Knill's Rhine-side cellar, a site children converted from bunker, to theatre by password, and puppet (Knill, 2011).

The argument unfolds through five braided movements, each tightening the claim that art may be flimsy in matter yet tensile in consequence. It opens in Knill's cellar, reading the puppet theatre as an early instance of distributed rehearsal. It then turns to the algorithmic choke-points and battery economies that contour artistic risk in Gaza, Khartoum, Suva, and Nairobi, where infrastructural doubleness becomes a critical lens. A third passage lingers in the Pacific, where canoe flotillas and virtual-reality lagoons practise durational poetics across tide cycles and visa ballots. A fourth section inhabits failure itself, treating power cuts, and false content flags as fertile disruptions that widen the range of play. The final movement addresses facilitation, arguing that tomorrow's practitioners will need anatomical precision, voltage diplomacy, and what one refugee artist calls paper choreography: the capacity to fold compliance spreadsheets until they resemble lived experience.

Humid Afternoons

On a humid afternoon in April 2025, in the rehabilitation ward of Deir al-Balah's Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, ten-year-old Ilaf al-Samak lifted a scratched virtual-reality visor to her brow and waited for the aquarium-blue loading screen to steady. The headset, printed on a camp-side 3-D rig and wired to a donated Android, opened TechMed's gait-training program. Coral and parrot-fish shimmered whenever she shifted weight from heel to toe. Ilaf, silent since the shrapnel wounds that ended her childhood football games, rose. Aquamarine pixels fanned out across the cracked floor tiles like a living path. A nurse began clapping in time, and cousins struck the bedframes for percussion. A physiotherapist murmured "follow the reef, habibti." Someone filmed. The seventy-second clip reached X before midnight, and by sunrise UNESCO's Youth for Hope desk had folded it into a briefing on trauma-responsive rehabilitation (2025). This exemplifies

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distributed rehearsal because the reef-path lets Ilaf rehearse a future gait inside present danger.

Forty-one months earlier and ten thousand kilometres away, a dawn fog drifted over New York's East River as students from the University of the South Pacific unrolled a lime-green tarpaulin across the deck of a borrowed sloop. They traced Lady Justice, replaced her scales with a stylised globe, and spray-painted VAKA 4 ICJ above the outline, invoking the ocean-going canoe as both vessel and legal compass. By noon the flotilla, including canoes, kayaks, one outrigger bright with reef-fish glyphs, slipped beneath the Manhattan Bridge. Banners snapped salt spray toward the glass façade of United Nations headquarters while office workers pressed against windows. Reuters called the sail-by "a surreal moment" of Pacific jurisprudence on the Hudson (Volcovici, 2022), and the campaign's own communique, posted that evening by Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change, framed the river passage as an acte de presence, proof that their islands' jurisprudence could cut through metropolitan glare (Prasad, 2022). This exemplifies durational poetics because a single canoe score accrues legal weight through serial repetition across oceans.

Elsewhere, in Kharkiv's Historicheska Muzei metro station, musicians from a shelled-out conservatory rosined their bows beneath vaulted concrete. On March 26, 2022 they opened KharkivMusicFest precisely on schedule. The stage had a yellow safety line. The audience huddled on blankets and the sounds of Bach and a children's choir lifted the rendition of "Shchedryk" into the subterranean dusk. Each overtone trembled fluorescent bulbs, turning a civil-defence bunker into something like a church nave. One toddler crawled forward with a paper sunflower, and the choir rewrote its coda around the rustle of petals. The Washington Post later described the event as a "concert between explosions" that let listeners breathe differently for half an hour (Kornfield & Suliman, 2022). This scene exemplifies distributed rehearsal because music scripts a timed corridor of safety without pausing the bombardment.

Three crises, three continents, one through-line: when familiar worlds fracture into projectile, paperwork, or siren, the young will still hunt for portals, whether of pixel reef, river canvas, or subway chord, inviting the rest of us to follow. Across a hospital ward, a canoe flotilla, and a subway nave, we see the same grammar: danger is neither ignored nor postponed. It is bracketed by timed, repeatable play. Distributed rehearsal therefore converts terror into tempo, letting agency surface long enough for policy or breath to adjust.

Knill recalls how the cellar of his wartime Swiss village morphed, in children's hands, into what he later named a "Magic Underworld". It was a bunker and theatre at once, equal parts evacuation drill and carnival (Knill, 2011). Contemporary projects keep rehearsing the same conversion. The Phoenix of Gaza XR collective has stitched salvaged 360-degree camera footage into walk-through virtual scenes that now tour universities, allowing visitors to wander bomb-scarred streets inside a headset and to sense rubble as portal rather than endpoint (Dellis, 2025). Here infrastructural doubleness manifests when salvaged 360-footage turns destroyed streets into walkable data. Farther west, the exhibition Fire Transforms at the Palo Alto Art Center gathered California wildfire survivors who sifted ash and char into photographs and sculptures, framing trauma as material rather than debris (Nayyar, 2022). Here infrastructural doubleness appears as ash becomes pigment, toggling loss into tactile archive.

The sensibility binding these scenes is old, while the interfaces are unmistakably new. Where Knill's cohort scavenged material for marionette limbs, today's displaced adolescents download code snippets from open-source repositories, side-load sketch apps onto repurposed phones, and nurse battery life through chains of power banks topped up on improvised solar mats. Art making has seldom been more technologically fragile, yet it has never travelled so widely. Salvaged cameras, ash pigment, bureaucratic prose, VR wetlands: each case pivots between scarce matter and abundant code. Infrastructural doubleness is thus less a medium than a hinge. It reveals that every platform rests on an unstable floor, and artists learn to dance on both layers at once. To see what is meant by distributed rehearsal, we can listen to Knill himself. He remembers how that alchemy first took shape beneath a different sky:

> They lived on Swiss territory on the German side of the Rhine during World War 2. The neighborhood was a mixture of German NSPD members working on the German "Reichsbahn" (Hitler's Railway) under the Swastika, and Swiss citizens partially organized underground, preparing for

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> a possible guerilla activity in an occupation by Nazi Germany. The Swiss Army has given up on this undefendable small territory. The tension and anxiety were high, and neither side dared to act out the conflict, fearing a later retribution. The kids we will focus on were between 7 and 13 years old. As the oldest of them, I remember that the relationships between those kids under the swastika were ominous.

> Restrictions had not been explained to us, and when we had some fun together, it was "talked away" by parents. The confusion reached its peak when the bombardments by the Allied forces started. The humming silver flocks of bombers crossed the blue sky, suddenly planting "Silver Christmas Trees" in the blue, and each time shortly after the earth shook like an earthquake. We rejoiced and they panicked, until they hit us for the first time, still with almost no damage. From that moment on, strong air-raid alarm rules were put in effect, and more and more time was spent in the improvised air-raid shelters, which every household had to build. (2011, p. 53)

Three features of that scene anchors a framework: first, the bunker doubles as a stage, prefiguring the mobile shelters that follow; second, the long-running puppet saga provides a repeatable temporal bracket (the rehearsal itself); third, the shared password acts as a low-tech access protocol, an analogue precursor to the QR codes and battery chains traced later in this paper.

Professional humanitarian writing has, for roughly two decades, moved back and forth between the upbeat notion of "bounce-back" resilience and a more sober recognition that some wounds never close (Department for International Development [DFID], 2011; IFRC, 2016). Levees can wash away again before engineers arrive, and a truce may lapse before roof beams are lifted. When volunteer doctors rotate out, the trauma clinic can collapse back into a tent. In that churn, the very word community loses fixity. Kin networks scatter across time zones, kept in touch by prepaid SIM cards and compressed voice notes rather than courtyard gossip (UNHCR, 2016; GSMA, 2022; Forced Migration Review, 2024).

Art programs that aim to shift conflict dynamics must therefore navigate both physical dispersal and algorithmic congestion. A mural started on a Khartoum shelter wall, for example, is often photographed and posted to WhatsApp groups where diaspora relatives suggest new captions or Nubian-Arabic spellings. The same images circulate under hashtags that knit Sudanese organisers and supporters across several continents (Elmileik & Khalil, 2019; Murray, 2020). What emerges is no longer a tidy warmup for a later plenary but a distributed rehearsal in which speech, image and code cross pollinate like fungal spores riding high winds.

The notion of decentering, as a step outside a conflict's chokehold, survives. Today, however, the corridor is threaded through fibre-optic cables and patrolled by algorithms that neither participants nor facilitators fully understand. Human Rights Watch documented more than one thousand peaceful pro-Palestinian posts that Meta's automated systems removed or buried in just eight weeks of late-2023 fighting, confirming that opaque filters can silence users without warning (Human Rights Watch, 2023). A European-Parliament study adds that such classifiers are statistical and fallible, that false positives are inherent, and redress procedures are often weak (Sartor & Loreggia, 2020). In May 2021 WhatsApp blocked at least seventeen Gaza journalists after its automated review associated their group traffic with militant content, erasing whole chat histories in the process (Al Jazeera, 2021). A pastel sketch shared by a teenager to an art-therapy chat can encounter the same machinery. Compression artefacts shift colour values, a crimson accent is parsed as a missile plume, and the image triggers a "violent content" flag and disappears. The facilitator apologises and asks for a new upload, and the teen's emotional momentum stalls. Mohydin's policy paper on Gaza notes that such micro-interruptions accumulate into a new register of suppression, felt as personal rebuke rather than technical failure (Mohydin, 2024). Facilitators must therefore work on two levels at once: widening the imaginative gap that makes play possible, and mapping the infrastructural mesh that can choke it. The cellars of 1943 offer a resonant pre-digital prelude to these conditions:

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> In the public shelter, the kids were all huddling together wondering if we had been hit when the earth shook—or else just bored by the long waiting times and wondering how we could change this. A few of us, mainly under the leadership of my brother and myself, explored the fantasy of an underground world as a play space. Regardless of the political alliances of our parents, we started to construct furniture together, painting the walls and carpeting the ugly cellar floor of our private air-raid shelters. We assisted each other in building toys and selecting puppets or vehicles to go permanently into this underworld. After the first of the three devastating bombardments of our city and neighborhood, we had to spend more time in our "underworld" than above. When the alarm howled, we tried to arrange it so that we reached a shelter where we could all play out our stories. We had long-running stories with puppet protagonists, featuring ourselves in well-defined roles. (2011, pp. 53-54)

Yet despite such frictions, participants still report what Knill once called an expanding "range of play." A well-documented example comes from Ovalau Island, Fiji. In April 2005 elders, fisherfolk and Suva-based university students spent nine days building a 1:10, 000 participatory three-dimensional model of the entire island (Rupeni et al., 2005). Using coloured pins and wooden dowels, elders traced ancestral footpaths and near-shore fishing grounds that spring tides now cut off twice each month. When one cardboard reef layer warped and lifted, children burst into laughter and immediately dubbed the buckle "the breathing reef," a name that stuck throughout the workshop. That playful moment helped younger map-makers talk about land loss without shutting down emotionally. The finished relief was later carried to the Lomaiviti Provincial Council, where community delegates used it to argue that any future relocation plan must include space for a new mangrove and food-garden nursery as well as for houses, a recommendation that appears verbatim in the island's Resource Management and Action Plan (Rambaldi et al., 2006, pp. 30–32). In other words, the choreography of the mapping session inverted the usual hierarchy. Provincial planners ended up following the community's colour-coded contours instead of treating the model as a decorative prop.

Critics often wonder whether community-based art merely acts as palliative care for structural violence. Does it lull participants into accepting the unlivable, or divert insurgent energy toward outputs that please funders with tidy metrics? The question is not idle, especially where grant cycles arrive laden with compliance clauses and monitoring spreadsheets. Yet Palestinian artists have repeatedly folded that very skepticism back into the work itself, turning donor bureaucracy into dramaturgical material rather than leaving it as an unspoken frame.

Consider the House of Yasmine, first staged in 2012 inside Jenin's Freedom Theatre. The play opens as a mock television talk-show in which the host, a human-rights worker named Yasmine, invites the audience to comment on foreign aid and the Palestinian Authority's statehood bid. As the plot spirals, Yasmine is struck by a sniper and well-meaning friends scramble to draft funding proposals for "green medicine" while she bleeds beside them. Each proposal is stripped of political language, each must be countersigned with a pledge that no funds will reach so-called terrorists. The absurdity compounds until viewers can see the aid pipeline itself as a character more powerful than any actor on stage. During post-show discussions spectators in Jenin openly critiqued their own NGOs' reliance on foreign money, insisting that the performance made visible a cycle in which recovery is delayed so that professional saviours can stay employed (Gyeney, 2012).

Nearly a decade later the same dramaturgical critique moved from stage to street. In late 2019 a bloc of Palestinian organisations issued the Against Terrorism and Against Conditional Funding statement, launching what soon became the National Campaign to Reject Conditional Funding (BADIL, 2019). By July 2020 the campaign counted roughly 230 signatory NGOs and was the subject of substantial local press coverage, with spokespeople arguing that the European Union's new anti-terror clause criminalised everyday political life and forced civil society to police its own members (Alsaafin, 2020). Activists circulated graphics that reproduced the contested contract language on recycled aid banners and overlaid it with medical icons labelled "Development", a visual reminder that aid can keep patients alive without letting them recover (Campaign Q & A, 2020). The pressure worked at least in part. EU representatives entered follow-up consultations on the clause's wording in the second half of 2020, confirming that aesthetic intervention can nudge policy when

the debate refuses to stay indoors (Alsaafin, 2020).

Later work at the Freedom Theatre has pushed the funding question into the rehearsal room itself. Writing in The Stage, director Zoe Lafferty describes 2021 studio sessions in which acting students arrived with real rejection letters from foreign donors, read the bureaucratic prose aloud as if it were lyric text, then translated its phrasing into physical improvisations. Some letters collapsed into abrupt silence, others exploded into dance phrases that mimicked stamping, signing or shredding. Lafferty stresses that the exercise did not remove the funding bind but instead it equipped emerging artists with a concrete way to name the power relations they must negotiate before any show can open (Lafferty, 2021).

Far from anaesthetising rebellion, these practices externalise the donor apparatus so that young performers can walk around it, cut it down to scale, or, on nights when the satire lands, laugh it off the stage entirely. In that laughter the critical charge survives, sharper than the paperwork it refuses to obey. This vignette shows infrastructural doubleness; bureaucratic language bent into stage satire that circulates on and off paper.

Knill once wrote that the completion of a communal artwork may "elicits an Aha" (Knill, 2015, p. 87); today the exclamation often sounds ironic. Participants, fluent in meme logic, sometimes sabotage neat finales on purpose, preferring a ragged edge over tidy catharsis. One need only watch the closing session of the Courage in Congo mural program, held in April 2016 outside Goma's CAMME youth centre. According to the project's final evaluation, the unveiling ceremony was scripted to end with dignitaries posing beside a freshly varnished wall. Instead, several adolescent painters began thumping empty water jugs to test the echo under the zinc roof. The beat spread to waiting relatives who added bottle-cap shakers, and within minutes the planned speeches dissolved into a call-and-response chant that drowned the microphone. Evaluators abandoned the formal debrief and suggested that the impromptu percussive loop achieved the project's psychosocial goal more vividly than any survey item could measure (Colors of Connection, 2016, pp. 28-29).

A comparable tilt toward productive discord emerged at the 2024 Goma Dance Festival, held outdoors on June 15. Associated Press images show performers sliding barefoot across the open stage, splashing through thin sheets of rain-water that had gathered between lighting runs. Rather than stop, they folded the puddles into the score, clapping sharp back-beats off the surface while two spectators upended plastic wash-basins to deepen the percussion. Festival director Florent Muganza told reporters that the improvised "water riff" conveyed more about the chaos of coltan extraction than any choreographed freeze ever could (Sawasawa & Pronczuk, 2024). When the piece ended there was no tidy curtain call; the audience drifted away humming the pulse that the dancers had coaxed from the downpour, leaving only a chain of blurred photo frames where protest, weather and play briefly coincided. The puddle riff widens durational poetics by folding rainfall into the score's living meter.

In moments such as these the artwork's harvest is not the polished freeze but the aleatory surprises that widens the range of play, inviting everyone present, facilitators, funders, toddlers, clouds, to improvise the ending together.

Knill closes the circle, showing how a wartime underworld finally surfaced into daylight:

> Interestingly enough, the mothers did not interfere: they seemed to be relieved that the kids were taken care of, while they had to cope with gardening and civil service, maintaining the infrastructure of the city without husbands, who by that time they all were in the army. By 1944 our "Magic Underworld" was so fascinating that we spent more time playing together there than outside; most of our toys, pastels and papers joined us there. The kids of the two sides never enacted the political rift, even though we knew about the fate of the Reich and awaited the GIs with eagerness. Our great personal experience was our play in the magic underworld, and our sadness when it was over. My brother and I ended up having a good friendship with the German kids, and we went on using the password we invented to begin the play for many years more. (2011, p. 54)

The harvesting phase, Knill's term for structured reflection, now frequently passes through encrypted chat

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rooms where anonymity cloaks risk. Conversation may be punctuated by blurred selfies or ironic GIFs, a participant will declare, "I felt like the drone camera," and the group deciphers whether that metaphor refers to surveillance or to transcendent overview or both. What was once a face-to-face naming of sensory impressions has become multi-modal polyphony. The facilitator, aware that biometric identifiers could be extracted from video, may instruct everyone to switch off cameras and translate movement memory into rustling paper or mouth-click rhythms. Decentering thus stretches not only across imaginative domains but also across layers of digital self-presentation.

Knill's cellar followed a linear wartime rhythm. Sirens, shelter, rumour, liberation. Twenty-first-century crises loop instead. In March 2022, the cooks who had once fronted #CookForSyria reopened their Instagram playbook as #CookForUkraine. By October, the project had enlisted 292 restaurants and raised about PS1.8 million for UNICEF and allied relief agencies, showing that a recipe perfected for one catastrophe can be reheated for the next (Cumming 2017; Hercules & Timoshkina 2022). A similar echo was audible in Berlin, where Burcak Sevilgen and Faina Karlitski turned an empty coworking suite into two makeshift classrooms for forty newly arrived Ukrainian children. Within two weeks they had secured rent-free rooms from the search-engine cooperative Ecosia, sponsorship from the youth charity Arche and a flow of small private donations that covered teachers' stipends (Associated Press 2022). Mbembe notes that contemporary war is "no longer waged between the armies of two sovereign states" but by armed factions whose violence settles into everyday civilian space where conflict becomes a durational condition rather than an event (Mbembe 2019, p. 35). Under such atmospheric siege, community art must beat like a metronome, repetitive, adaptive, and able to metabolise shock through low-threshold gestures that do not promise closure yet keep agency alive.

Sea-level rise grinds at Tuvalu's atolls centimetre by centimetre, and policy has begun to move only slightly faster. Canberra and Funafuti signed the Australia–Tuvalu Falepili Union Treaty on November 9, 2023, and the agreement entered into force on August 28, 2024 (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2024). The treaty created the Falepili Mobility Pathway, a ballot that will grant up to 280 permanent-resident visas each year to Tuvaluans who choose migration as a form of climate adaptation. When registrations opened on June 16, 2025, 3,125 people, almost one third of the nation's 10,643 citizens, entered the ballot during its first week (Agence France-Presse 2025).

Artists and archivists responded with durational tactics rather than single-night galas. One thread reaches back to Water is Rising, a fourteen-city tour that carried dancers and musicians from Tuvalu, Kiribati and Tokelau across the United States in 2011. The performers beat biscuit-tin drums and chanted for renewable energy, insisting that a footwork pattern repeated night after night could speak statistics in a register auditors might finally feel (Ayers 2011; Smithsonian Ocean Portal 2011). Another thread unfurled at COP 26 when Foreign Minister Simon Kofe recorded a speech while standing knee-deep in Funafuti Lagoon. The video went viral, previewing Tuvalu's plan to build a full digital twin of the nation, complete with scanned topography, family photo albums and hymn recordings stored on cloud servers in Singapore (Guardian Staff and Agencies 2021; Green 2022). Officials describe the twin as "a safety deposit box for sovereignty," an archive that will outlast the palm-roots if the tide keeps climbing.

Side by side, the Falepili visa ballot and Tuvalu's digital-twin project expose culture as more than decoration. They show it is circuitry that must stay live when people scatter. Tuvalu's government says the online archive is being built for island schools and for households abroad, so that hymns, lagoon sound-scapes and language lessons can be streamed wherever the diaspora meets for evening talanoa (Chandran & Zami 2024). ABC reporters following Tuvalu migrants in western Sydney note that "retaining cultural practices" is already a top priority for families preparing to relocate under the scheme (Veldkamp 2024). A phone speaker carrying Funafuti surf across a suburban lawn may seem humble, yet in a crisis measured in millimetres such sensory loops can metabolise exile into continuity. Pedagogy adapts in parallel. Facilitators meeting a traumatised group begin not with objectives but by pacing the room's tempo. They consult the barometric forecast, knowing that a sudden pressure drop can sharpen neuropathic pain in amputee dancers (Terajima et al. 2025), and they time the first vocal warm-up between local siren tests to avoid reflex dread. Later, feedback

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turns anatomical: "I heard your second breath catch when the paper tore; what sensation ran down your Achilles tendon?" Precision invites reflection without pathologising or abstracting the moment.

Refugee-led arts programmes are sustained not just by imagination but by the quiet logistics of electricity. In Jordan's Za'atari camp, traders have run thin cables off the overhead grid into makeshift charging kiosks. For as little as five Syrian pounds a handset is left to drink a night's worth of current, a micro-economy that keeps music workshops and video diaries alive even when family shelters stay dark (Pizzi 2013). In the Calais "Jungle" of 2016, Good Chance Theatre stationed bicycles fitted with dynamo generators beside its geodesic dome so residents and volunteers could pedal phones and amplifiers back to life before the evening show, turning the clatter of gears into a pre-performance ritual (Haydon 2016). At Budapest's Keleti Station during the 2015 exodus, Greenpeace Hungary erected a canvas tent whose chief attractions were power strips and free Wi-Fi. Syrian traveller Rabee Mohammed told a Time reporter that, if forced to choose, he would "choose charging my phone" over food because only a powered handset could reassure his mother that he was still moving west (Witty 2015). Across these sites, solidarity often begins with voltage. A cable passed, a pedal turned, a battery shared, each gesture enabling the next beat, lyric or video call to reach the air. At dawn on day one, pupils glued recycled cardboard contours into a rising relief while elders pinned stories to its damp surface, forming the tactile archive already detailed above that later guided the Lomaiviti Council's Resource Management Plan (Rambaldi et al., 2006, pp. 30–32). This is distributed rehearsal because the model lets villagers rehearse planning authority before it is granted.

Knill likened musical accompaniment to a fellow dancer who neither leads nor obeys. The metaphor holds, but the technological substrate now exerts a heavier hand. In a Gaza displacement camp, a musician named Samir wire-strapped five broken radio speakers into a rough pentagon, hoping to generate surround sound from a cracked Nokia loaded with oud samples. The pentagon worked until a power surge fried three speakers. Samir then placed the remaining two at opposite corners and encouraged participants to fill the silent vertices with body percussion. Children discovered that if they stamped in puddles their splashes rounded the missing frequencies: women layered ululations on top; a Canadian field-worker live-tweeted the jam, accidentally feeding a short clip into Western media cycles as evidence of indomitable spirit. Samir cringed at the paternalism yet recognised that coverage protected his workshop from military raid, as the world was watching. Music thus wielded geopolitical leverage by hybridising analogue scrap with digital broadcast.

Silence in Ukraine is rarely neutral.When a missile strike trips the grid, the hush can feel like a second weapon. At a December 2022 concert in Cherkasy the power failed mid-set, plunging singer Artem Pivovarov and three thousand listeners into darkness. Instead of evacuating, the crowd flicked on phone torches and joined Pivovarov in an unaccompanied refrain of "Dumi," the Taras Shevchenko poem he had set to music. Journalists later described the unplanned a cappella drone as "a blackout turned breathing lesson" that steadied heart rates while sirens wailed outside (Enerio, 2022). Earlier that year, KharkivMusicFest had opened on a subway platform repurposed as a bomb shelter. Violins traced Bach into the tunnel until the audience's own humming filled the rests between air-burst concussions, an "oscillation between dread and relief," as one Washington Post reporter put it (Kornfield & Suliman, 2022). In both instances, the absence of electricity did not cancel music, it re-tuned bodies to the key of survival.

Out of the same acoustical void have grown volunteer brigades whose medium is not harmony but hand-cut polycarbonate. Insulate Ukraine, a collective of Ukrainian and foreign engineers, has installed more than four thousand blast-resistant plastic windows in front-line towns where glass supplies vanished months ago. Founder Harry Blakiston Houston calls the work "quiet infrastructure," because each pane dampens wind roar and artillery echo, giving residents a pocket of stillness in which to think (Voitenko, 2024). In Kherson, emergency crews and neighbours formed ad-hoc "window teams" that replaced thirty-three thousand panes in the winter of 2023 alone. Radio Free Europe noted that the crews often worked in near silence, the only sound a utility knife scoring plexiglass while distant shelling rattled doorframes (Kuzakov & Tizard, 2023). Here artistic sensitivity morphs into logistical attunement: a song that survives a blackout teaches rhythm for the hands that later seal a frame, and the hush that once threatened vulnerability becomes the measure against

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which repaired walls, roofs, and nerves are tested.

Earlier expressive-arts manuals insist that feedback stay descriptive, never interpretive. In practice that rule now travels through translation engines whose logic is anybody's guess. Jessica Bauman's nine-day theatre intensive in Kenya's Kakuma camp made the problem visible. Her English explanations arrived in Swahili shrunk from paragraphs to bumper-sticker slogans, so she abandoned verbal nuance and coached forty Congolese, Somali and South Sudanese actors to sculpt meanings with bodies instead of clauses (Bauman, 2016). When a joke vanished in transit the group simply paused, replayed the gesture in silence, and let laughter surface on its own timetable, proof that mistranslation can open, rather than close, a field of play. The principle survived the final performance. Reviewers noted that spectators "read" the show through movement alone, an outcome Bauman later framed as evidence that descriptive feedback can ride on muscle memory when language fails (Bauman, 2016).

Failure, likewise, is no longer a verdict; it is raw pigment. After La Soufrière blanketed Saint Vincent in volcanic ash in April 2021, painters Calvert Jones and Cheyenne Slater mixed that powder into acrylic to memorialise the eruption. Their trio of canvases auctioned two months later to fund reef restoration carried visible grit and curators warned that particles might flake, yet bidders embraced the risk, arguing that instability was "part of the testimony" (Harry, 2021; St. Vincent & the Grenadines Conservation Fund [SVGCF], 2021). Reviewers called the ash-speckled surfaces "devastation held in suspension," and primary-school classes were invited to touch a small test panel so they could feel the fragility for themselves. What once looked like a materials defect became a pedagogical asset: residue that keeps the catastrophe restless, refusing the fixity donors often demand.

Aesthetic responsibility therefore now includes bureaucratic storytelling. Translators must re-describe emergent art so auditors, who never glimpsed the process, grant it ontological status. A facilitator in Caracas refers to this as "paper choreography", the careful folding of spreadsheets until they resemble what actually happened, without flattening its contradiction.

When Israeli bombing razed the street where filmmaker Ahmad Hasaballah had hidden his 360-degree camera, the Phoenix of Gaza XR team assumed the project was over; yet in May 2024 neighbours pried the device from the rubble. Lenses cracked but the memory card intact. Co-creator Naim Aburaddi uploaded the salvaged footage to hard drives in Ramallah and Boston, then stitched it into new virtual-reality "after" scenes that sit beside the pre-war marketplace panoramas first captured in 2022. Viewers who tour the exhibition now toggle, headset in hand, between a fig orchard buzzing with bees and the same orchard seared black. The digital overlay survives where the physical grove has vanished, an act Aburaddi calls "saving the memory even when the soil is taken" (Dellis, 2025).

Meanwhile, in Khan Younis, displaced art teacher Basel El Maqosui runs what he calls Artistic Residence, Not Displacement. Children and mothers gather beside aid tents to draw their shredded streets on whatever scraps appear, a UNRWA notebook page, an empty flour sack, the silver underside of a pain-killer blister pack. The workshop's ethos is simple. If bombings erase canvases, the next canvas will be whatever the blast leaves behind. El Maqosui has logged more than one hundred such sessions since October 2023, and his students' charcoal ruins and bright palm fronds now hang in the Under Fire exhibition in Amman, where curators note that "medicine packaging and tea stains stand in for oil paint" (Abdul, 2025). Digital memory and scavenged material thus answer the same question from opposite sides of the blast line. How do you keep a window open when the wall itself is gone?

In that iterative palimpsest one glimpses the core premise of contemporary communal art. Material, digital, and narrative layers co-evolve, each ready to step in when the other collapses. Decentering, then, is not an escape from reality but a pivot among multiple partly broken realities, each offering a distinct foothold.

Words still struggle to keep pace with the practices that sprout wherever conflict, climate stress, and colonial residue overlap, yet three very recent constellations hint at the scale of the bloom.

First, a puppet on the move. "Little Amal," a 3.5-metre Syrian-refugee marionette animated by Hand-

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spring Puppet Company, has now walked more than 8,000 kilometres, from to Manchester, then on to Latin-American and U.S. cities, stopping at each border to trade gestures with local choirs, schoolchildren, and immigration activists. The project's producers call every layover an "open score", an invitation for towns to compose their own welcome scene, whether lullaby, lantern procession, or kite release (Lehnen, 2021). Because the puppet's operators rotate at each venue, technique is continually relearned in public, making the walk itself a lesson in portable pedagogy.

Second, coins in a Chicago gallery whisper about debt. At the Chicago Cultural Center, ceramicist kelli rae adams's Forever in Your Debt fills the Sidney R. Yates Gallery with hundreds of hand-thrown bowls slowly accumulating visitors' spare change. Each vessel represents roughly one-tenth of the average U.S. student-loan balance. When all bowls brim, the installation will equal the $37,000 borne by a typical borrower (City of Chicago DCASE, 2024). Gallery docents report that South Side high-school groups now use the piece as a live abacus during workshops on abolition economics. Students tip coins from bowl to bowl, rehearsing how a jubilee might feel in the hand long before legislation arrives.

Third, a river delta materialises in virtual headsets. Along Botswana's Thamalakane River the Nkashi Classic mokoro race has added an "Edu-Tent" packed with VR gear supplied by the Okavango Eternal conservation partnership. Between heats, teenagers steer digital canoes through a photogrammetric model of the Okavango Basin, then walk those headsets into briefings with visiting corporate sponsors. A pupil can quite literally drop a hippo sound-scape into a mining-executive's board-slide (Mmegi Staff Writer, 2025). Organisers say the VR detour has already shifted two funders from extractive concessions to riparian-buffer grants, evidence that immersive play can redraw a finance sheet. Here infrastructural doubleness turns VR headsets into capital brokers, stitching digital wetlands to real budgets.

Knill's caravan of "open scores" has indeed become a flotilla, carried today by puppetry rigging, rolled coins, and 360-degree wetlands. The grammar remains constant, curiosity disciplined by care, surprise tempered by consent, play bracketed by rigorous return. Water-is-Rising tours, visa ballots, puddle percussion, all stretch performance across months or millimetres, refusing tidy finales. Durational poetics metabolises slow violence by looping gestures until audiences feel time dilates. The art is not a respite but an instrument for staying with the trouble, rhythm by rhythm. Hope, in this idiom, is not a mood but a craft. It is sculpted each time participants gather voltage for the communal speaker, each time a salt-stained tracing paper nudges policy, each time a child lifts charcoal to outline a window onto the air. The cellar, the server farm, the submerged reef all are studios in the planetary school of conflict transformation. So long as bombs fall and tides rise, more lessons will be required. Facilitators will arrive with pockets full of low-skill, high-sensitivity tricks and communities will decide which to keep, which to warp, and which to hurl back at the sky in defiance.

When the next siren sounds, or the next embankment cracks, a door will open, perhaps drawn in dust, perhaps coded in light, and people will step sideways into a zone where the future can be rehearsed before it manifests. They may not know Knill's terminology, yet they will know in their bones that the rehearsal matters, because on the rehearsal's far side something shifts: a ligament unclenches, a bureaucrat blinks differently at a spreadsheet, a stranger leans close enough to feel another's breath. That shift is the precise measure of art's communal force. It is small, sometimes microscopic, but carried forward through song, pigment, data packet, and gesture, it can inch a whole culture toward the still-unwritten script of peace.

Conclusion

Wherever people are pressed against the limits of survival, the rehearsal of alternative orders does not cease; rather it mutates. Knill's password whispered across rubble has resurfaced as QR codes, pixelations, salted paper scores, and puddle percussion, each device repositioning the body just far enough outside the blast radius of despair that choice can re-enter the nervous system. What looked at first like children's diversion has proven to be an epistemology, a way of knowing the world through iterative, low-skill, high-sensitivity acts that translate calamity into briefly habitable form. The paper has named this epistemology distributed rehearsal, infrastructural doubleness, and durational poetics. The terms differ, yet each captures a facet of the same quiet insurgency, the claim that creativity is not a luxury postponed until safety returns, but a

technique for manufacturing safety in situ.

Such a claim carries methodological consequences. If policy analysts, funders, and facilitators continue to measure efficacy solely through metrics of restoration, they will miss the subtler, slower kinetic shifts that this study has foregrounded: a ligament that releases during drone-singing silence, a civil-service clause smuggled inside a cantata, or a relocation guideline crystallised out of salt-stained tracing paper. These shifts are small in amplitude, yet they propagate along social filaments much as sympathetic vibrations travel through a shell wall. Ignore them and one misreads the acoustics of resistance. Future research must therefore refine instruments capable of registering relational voltage, aleatory motifs, and temporal layering, lest the evidence of communal force be flattened into bureaucratic anecdote.

In the end, hope appears not as an affective surge but as artisanry, an incremental craft of arranging voltage, pigment, code, and breath so that fragile circuits hold long enough for decision and solidarity to pass through. The cellar, the mangrove, the server farm, and the refugee corridor now stand revealed as contiguous studios in the same planetary school. To walk between them is to accept that no rehearsal is ever final and that every score remains open, every portal provisional. Yet precisely in that openness lies the possibility that, when the next building cracks or the tide rises, someone will remember a gesture, such as how to tune to skull hum, how to splice mistranslation into sculpture, and in remembering, will keep the corridor of imagination available for others to enter. If cultures are to inch toward still-unwritten scripts of peace, it will be through such remembered gestures, modest but cumulative, rehearsed until they become irreversible.

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