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RARA IN LAVA CIRCULAR

THE PROJECT

RARA – Residência de Artesanato da Região dos Açores (Craftwork Residency of the Azores Region) is a continuous production project based in S. Miguel, Azores.

The project started in 2015 and encompasses two complementary aspects: annual artistic residencies and future commercialization of the resulting products under its own brand : RARA.

The artistic residency propose the intersection between professionals from creative areas and Azorean artisans, in the island of S.Miguel, crossing traditional techniques and endogenous raw materials with different conceptual models, thus enabling the transition to new supports and products.

The set of pieces/products developed during the residencies will be presented under the brand 'RARA', marketed with the aim of valuing and innovating local artisanal production, and the 'Azores brand'.

Over eight editions, curated by designer Miguel Flor, the residency had the participation of 24 creatives/collectives from 7 nationalities, and 15 artisans/craft production entities, that resulted in the design of around 150 prototypes, 50 of which will be included in the new RARA brand production catalogue. Its revenue will help to promote the activity of artisans and validate the continuity of the residency. The next editions of the residency will have an extended work period, in order to enhance the research, conceptualization and execution of the projects. An extension of the residency to other islands will also be introduced, thus fulfilling the archipelagic mission presented in the project's name.

The goal of this growth is to reposition the RARA project, reinforcing its vocation as a research space in design and crafts, now with a greater focus on the sustainability of the project, the production, distribution, commercialization and marketing. It is a complex process that involves many steps and investment, which can only be done in collaboration with all stakeholders - artists, designers, artisans, retail market - and also creating partnerships with entities that develop their work in the same area. In this sense, RARA has the support and consultancy of CADA - Centro de Artesanato e Design dos Açores (Azorian Design and Handcrafts Center), a government organization whose scope of action includes the certification of artisanal products based on the creation of a network of certified artisans, financial support, professional training, and the promotion of the Azorean crafts. RARA seeks to expand the field of action of CADA, with the aim of creating an innovative and circular economy project that benefits all stakeholders, producing knowledge and added value to all Azorean crafts and artisans, and affirming the artisanal practice as a career with future.

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Each residency culminates in a public program that includes an exhibition/presentation of the final results, which is also an opportunity to promote conversations about design, economics, collaboration and ecology. In 2022 the spanish designer Octavio Barrera and the collective Macheia, based in Lisboa, collaborated with the artisans Alcídio Andrade and Horácio Raposo. In 2023, designers João Rolaça, Margarida Lopes Pereira and Ivo Oliveira Rodrigues are invited to take part in the RARA residency. The intention is to bring the residency program to Sta. Maria island, where we will propose collaborations with artisans Cristina Bairos, Aida Bairos, Marina Mendonça and also with Cooperativa de Artesanato de Sta. Maria.

Images from the latest editions of RARA residencies and the resulting prototypes (©Mariana Lopes).



THE PROJECT

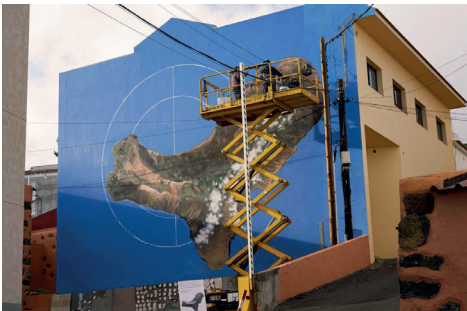
LAVA CIRCULAR - Lava Circular is an interdisciplinary cultural circuit on the island of El Hierro (Canary Islands). Active since 2017, it proposes to discover the territory by visiting its three municipalities (Valverde, El Pinar and La Frontera) through changing itineraries in which the program takes place; musical projects, talks-workshops and artistic actions that revolve around the traditional and contemporary culture of the Canary Islands, varying their main themes in each edition.

Different creatives present projects and initiatives, revitalizing unique locations on the island itself. A close and participatory meeting that generates knowledge exchanges between participants-artists, attendees and local inhabitants.

www.lavacircular.com

[@lavacircular](https://www.instagram.com/lavacircular)

Images from the latest editions of Lava Circular (©Lava Circular).



RARA/ARAR - Inverse Residences. The name ARAR arises from the opposition of RARA, since for the first time this project travels outside the Azores to interchange and work with different techniques and artisans far from its initial location, and at the same time promoting the connection between two outermost territories. For RARA it is essential to expand the processes and learn new ways of working with contemporaneity within regional territories. The main objective of this project is to preserve and promote the ancestral craft techniques from either the Canary Islands and the Azores, to create a space of experimentation and shared knowledge, and try to reach the new generations through a contemporary design approach. For Lava Circular 2022, the project curator Miguel Flor, together with the designer Alice Albergaria and the producer/coordinator Mariana Lopes travel to the island of El Hierro to carry out the first edition of the ARAR residency, together with the local wool artisan, Beatriz Ballester.

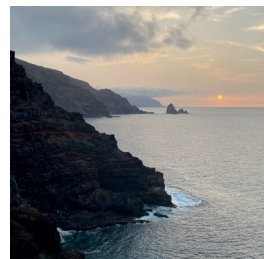
THE CONTEXT

EL HIERRO - Is the westernmost and southernmost of the Canary Islands (Spain), located in the Atlantic Ocean. It's the second least populated of the eight islands; it is also the one that has the smallest surface area among the seven largest islands. In the year 2000 was declared by Unesco as a Biosphere Reserve and in 2014 the entire island was declared a Geopark by Unesco. El Hierro, like the rest of the Canaries, is an island of volcanic origin. With an estimated age of one million years, it is the youngest Canary Island. El Hierro has different areas of vegetation, from desert lava fields to laurel forests, passing through pine forests, pastures and plantations.

Despite the fact that El Hierro is in the area of influence of the trade winds, the vegetation is not as lush as on the neighboring islands of La Palma, Tenerife and La Gomera. The reason is due to the fact that it's a young island, which is still largely covered by young lava fields. The forests that covered the central plateau of the island have almost disappeared due to felling and erosion of the land. The orography conditions the climate of each area of the island. However, it is the clouds that play the most important role in climate variations. The scarcity of water is one of the main conditioning factors for human settlement and farming. In El Hierro, the farming evolution has consisted in surviving with what the island itself produces, taking advantage of its few resources - since its soils are poor, lacks manantiales, has a very irregular rainfall and it's isolated. Besides small productions of vegetables, fruits and fishing, the island economy is traditionally based on livestock farms, composed of pigs, goats and sheep. Currently, the totality of the livestock farms are reduced in size, meaning the goat cattle, followed by the sheep, are the most important in El Hierro.

sources : [Wikipedia](#) [El Dia](#) [ADSR](#)

Images of El Hierro (@Mariana Lopes).



THE SHEEP, THE WOOL, THE CRAFTSWORK - The canary sheep is a mixture of African sheep - introduced by the Guanches -, Mediterranean, Iberian and mountain sheep - brought by European settlers. The passage of time, territorial isolation, the action of the insular climate, the breeding regime and the criteria of the island shepherds shaped a distinct type of sheep cattle, in which the original characteristics that forged it are still recognizable.

THE CONTEXT

Characteristics such as polychromy (colors), ear shapes, fur heterogeneity, etc. are reminiscent of African ancestry; while body shape, hair length, and capacity of producing milk are indicators of the European ancestry.

There are many civilizations that claim to be the first to create yarn. Wool is the animal fiber that was first used to make fabric. Even today it continues to be one of the main raw materials for making fabrics and garments because of its unrivaled properties. It comes that from the hair of sheep (*Ovis aries*). Chemically it is formed by a protein called keratin that is secreted by the hair bulbs located under the skin of animals. It is a complex fiber with a series of qualities that have been observed in practice over time and studied by specialists to improve its productivity and find out which are the most suitable treatments for it. From the time it is sheared until it is ready to be used for weaving, the wool has to go through a meticulous and laborious process.

Images of El Hierro's sheep (@Beatriz Ballester).



In El Hierro, until the late 20th century, people worked with wool out of necessity, due mainly to isolation. The objects produced by weaving were useful as garments, for agricultural tasks (animal saddlebags, shellfish baskets, purses, bags...) and for the household (pillows, sheets, rugs...).

Working with wool was included among the women's daily chores, that dedicated more or less time to it depending on the season and other field tasks they had to perform. Until reaching the step of spinning, almost all the women and quite a few men knew the process, because when they were children they all participated in 'twisting the thread while tending the cattle as entertainment', comments the husband of a weaver.

THE CONTEXT

The original use for preparing and weaving wool was lost with the progressive abandonment of agricultural and livestock tasks, as well as the improvement of transportation and life conditions. At the moment, the artisans themselves understand this activity as being linked to other historical periods in which they had less access to goods. This work has been simplified in such a way that its quantity, quality, and even variety have disappeared.

Today, since that there is almost no one left that prepares wool - the few left artisans buy the yarn already prepared - the shorn wool is given away, and what is left goes to the garbage. The shepherds do not know what to do with this product, which led them to consider introducing a sheep breed without wool, to avoid shearing.

Since the 1980s, the Government of the Canary Islands and the governments of each island aimed to promote the different forms of traditional craftsmanship and have managed to recover the work of weaving wool. The difficulty arises because it is not a craft that is necessarily transmitted to the following generations. On one hand, the economy of young people does not depend on these means of subsistence, and on the other hand, there's the fact that many descendants do not feel the vocation/reason to continue with these crafts. But small groups and associations have been formed, by people interested in maintaining alive the weaving tradition.



THE CONTEXT

In the words of Cristina Guadarrama, a local artisan and part of the Hero Artisan Association :

After that time when craftsmanship was not craftsmanship, but part of daily work - especially women's work - and where women did not know that one day they would be called 'artisans', because what they did was their daily chores; we find ourselves at the gates of a future in which, those who today call ourselves artisans, should do something positive and dignified, not only for the work we do, but also for the responsibility of the cultural heritage that we have in our hands, which is not only the technical knowledge of artisanal processes, but that goes further, it has to do with traditions, with gastronomy, with parties,... in short, with the culture and future of our island. (...) Now it's up to us to claim that what we do is part of the rural labors of yesteryear and of today's daily life, that the vessels that potters made in times past are still useful, even if for other uses; that the blanket that the weaver Alcira wove when she was little can also be useful today.

source : *La Tejeduría en la isla de El Hierro*, Asociación Mazaroca, El Hierro, 2007

BEATRIZ BALLESTER - Is an artist and artisan from the La Esperanza area of the island of Tenerife. She is one of the promoters of the Canarian association Mazaroca and the projects "[Una Bolsa que Suma](#)" and "[A través de la Lana](#)". Beatriz is based at El Hierro at the moment, where she has her studio, and has been developing her work around sheep's wool and the recovery of the trade throughout the Archipelago. Beatriz works on the entire wool process, from shearing the animals to selling the fabrics. Beatriz is a profound *connoisseur* of ancient looms and is in contact with the artisans of the Canary Islands, who still preserve ancestral techniques.

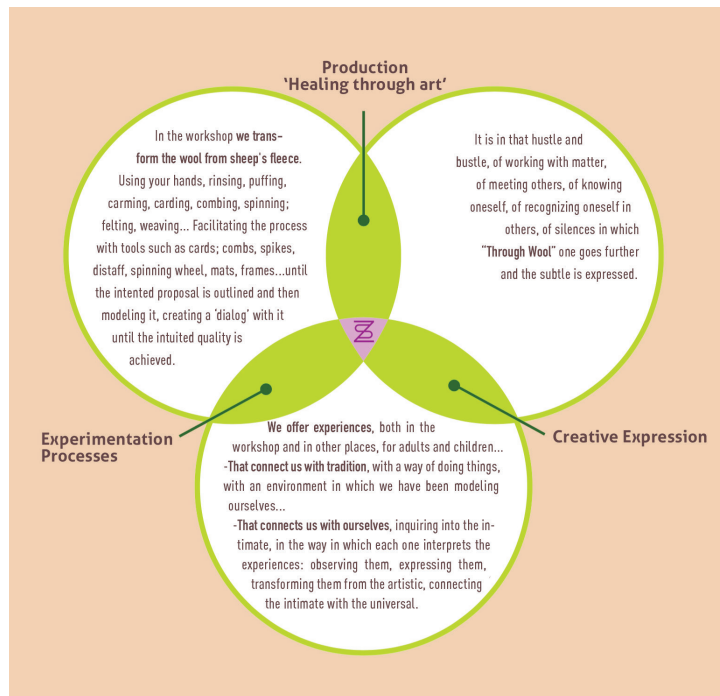
Her work not only encompasses the traditional ways of working the wool but intends to extend it to an ethnographic, sustainable, educational, creative and therapeutical dimension. Since 2001, she has been designing workshops both for children and adults, and has exhibited, published and lectured both in the Canary Islands and in the rest of Spain, as well as in Europe and the USA.

Beatriz works in her studio, responding to commissions and producing wool pieces, but also investigates the possibilities of connection between wool, individual development, and creative expression, questioning at the same time the purpose, the value of wool

THE CONTEXT

and traditional techniques within contemporary society. She invites the participants of her workshops to experience a creative proposal through wool and to approach a traditional technique beyond its utilitarian character, turning it into something with a contemporary artistic value. The life of the wool, from the time it is the fleece of the animal until it becomes a material, constitutes for her a path of personal self-knowledge through touch, smell, color, and shape..., ways of development that can also be associated with therapeutic and healing processes. This framework is also aligned with the UN's SDGs, promoting good wealth and well-being, reducing inequalities, creating sustainable communities, and responsible consumption/production.

sources : [TEA](#) [El Dia](#) [El Diario](#) [El Digital de Canarias](#)



THE DEVELOPMENT

LEARNING THE PROCESS - In the first few days, Beatriz led us through the wool preparation process, while presenting her conceptual approach: how wool cleaning and manufacturing process can be understood as an artistic material and for personal/communal development purposes.

The shearing process was not experienced, as it is done once a year, in the spring. We proceeded directly to the preparation of wool, which starts with washing. The wool is washed several times to loose most of the impurities and the 'wool grease', (from which lanolin is extracted). After washing, the wool is dried to be ready for the next step: grading and sorting. Wool is separated and detangled by hand, to loose the rest of the vegetable fibers that may have remained after washing. All parts of the process are essential for the outcome, but grading and sorting are perhaps the most crucial. It is a very mechanical process, which can also be interpreted as meditative, and the care and precision with which it is done will determine the quality of the yarn.

In this part of the process, Beatriz took us to visit the workshop of one of the oldest weavers in El Hierro: Dueña Carmen, in Isora, one of the only weavers on the island that produces its own yarn. Dueña Carmen showed us how to grade and sort, and we shared a communal moment in which we were all working together. We also saw some examples of the old looms still used in El Hierro.



THE DEVELOPMENT

Beatriz also introduced us to her community project "[Una Bolsa que Suma](#)". Once a week, she takes wool to the main square of the village of El Pinar, and during the afternoon everyone is invited to participate in the grading and sorting part of the wool transformation process and later to create small bags.



The next step of the process is carding, which used to be done with combs before 'cards' were introduced in the Middle Ages. It can be done with two types of tools: cards or a hand-cranked carder. By placing a handful of wool on one card and combing it until it had been transferred to the other, and then repeating the process several times, a light, airy fiber would result. Carding separates wools more effectively than combing, and it did so without losing the shorter fibers. It was also a good way to blend different types of wool.



After carding the wool, there are two possible paths: the fibers can be spun to form a yarn that will be the base to weave a fabric, or they can be felted. Felting is a process that consists in putting together layers of carded wool, which after being compressed and sprayed with hot water will blend into a single piece of fabric. This is the process that Beatriz is more familiar with, as most of her final objects are produced with the felting technique. It's also a process that Alice was unfamiliar with, so she decided to learn it to transform the wool and use it in the concept of the final presentation.

THE DEVELOPMENT

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT - Alice decided that the final presentation would focus on a large felt piece, produced with Beatriz's guidance, uniting different shades of wool to create a gradient, reminiscent of a phenomenon observed by the artist at dawn, on the island: the formation of a very particular fog made the horizon line imperceptible. The sky merged with the sea and from the sea emerged the black rock that forms the island. Alice, together with curator Miguel, developed a way to display this piece and what other elements could formalize the final presentation. Since the wool transformation process was so crucial in the residence, they decided to present it in its different stages, using different devices: the buckets where the wool was washed and the metal spiral that was used to dry it. These elements were complemented with pieces of wool: carded wool and yarn, as well as some initial experiences produced during the learning process of felting.



Images of the residency (@Mariana Lopes).

THE OUTCOME

PRESENTATION - The public presentation was held on the second day of the Lava Circular festival, at the Contemporary Arts Museum of El Pinar. Alice and Miguel, together with Beatriz, explained the project to the festival attendees and guided them through the exhibition, showing the different parts of the process, the felted piece, and a small projection of pictures from the residency.



Images of the residency (@Mariana Lopes ©Miguel Flor).

THE IMPACT

The processes of transformation of raw material into objects that serve specific needs, whether utilitarian or aesthetic, are always in constant transformation. In the particular case of artisanal processes, it is important to ask: what is the validity of their preservation and how it can be done? If, apparently, the purpose for which these processes, and their consequent objects were developed finds no place in contemporary society, how can we reframe both the process and the objects so that there is a sense of continuity, and at the same time, evolution? How can we preserve the knowledge of these techniques or prevent they become simply stagnant and associated with a certain folklorization and romanticization of traditional knowledge and ways of living?

In this residency, we learned a process that was determinant in the experience of a territory, the way it is developed and resignified today, and how it is moving towards new conceptual models, which include perceiving them in its communitarian, social, and artistic dimensions. We also acknowledged the importance of communication and exchange knowledge between outermost territories, which share certain constraints that were an essential part of their territorial, social and communal development.

As for the impact of the residency in our practice in the Azores, we concluded that we are on the verge of a transformation, repositioning, and growth of the residencies, and the way Beatriz Ballester reframes the artisanal process can be very helpful in finding our way of reframing the process with the context of the Azores.

How can we reframe the meaning and outcome of our proposal? How can we open this process to the community? How can creatives/designers be involved and also understand the material processes and transformation? How can artisans learn creative processes that allow them to innovate in their practice? How can we turn these residencies into a continuous and participatory process, in collaboration with other entities? In which way and with what purpose should we commercialize the products? These are some of the questions that we came back with, and that we hope to answer within the development of the RARA project.

RARA

RARA - ARAR

INVERSE RESIDENCIES
2022

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vivre
les
cultures

