

DOMESTIC ARCHAEOLOGY by Daniela Beltrani
Fara in Sabina (Rieti) IT, October 2025

An exhibition in an ancient house at Fara on the occasion of the 21st AMACI Contemporary Art Day

On the occasion of the 21st AMACI Contemporary Art Day - a contemporary art event that opens museums, galleries, and cultural spaces for free across Italy, promoting inclusion and cultural participation - I opened to the public *Domestic Archaeology*, the inaugural exhibition of KEΠOS, within the evocative historic village of Fara in Sabina (Rieti), 45 km northeast of Rome.

Domestic Archaeology has been a physical and poetic exploration of hidden and abandoned spaces, a journey into intimacy, memory, and the images that constitute our life experience and the place which is the starting and return point of our days: the home.

Inaugural exhibition of KEΠOS, a living and art space in Fara in Sabina (Rieti)

KEΠOS (www.kepos.art) is a space where art and life converge and coexist, as it is not only a home but also an artist's studio, library, exhibition space, and an evolving project for artist residencies and cultural initiatives.

KEΠOS welcomes and nourishes the spirit according to a Senecan *otium* perspective, encouraging practices of slowness, silence, active listening, immersion in the present moment, deep aesthetic experience, low environmental impact activities, and the calm and peaceful life of a historic village near Rome, yet far enough to avoid its chaotic energy.

The name, derived from the ancient Greek ΚΗΠΟΣ meaning garden and womb, is inspired by the school and community Epicurus founded just outside Athens in the 4th century BC. His ethical philosophy was based on happiness as a state of inner serenity (*ataraxia*) and absence of physical pain (*aponia*), achieved through rational management of desires, satisfaction of natural and necessary pleasures, reduction of fears, simple living (away from the city), friendship, and knowledge. KEΠOS's garden is inspired by these concepts; however, it is metaphysical since there is no real garden, yet it still welcomes and nourishes the spirit.

Exhibition-event-installation

Taking inspiration from the AMACI Contemporary Art Day, the *Domestic Archaeology* exhibition was configured as an event limited to one day only: Saturday 4 October 2025, from 11 am to 6 pm. The idea of this unusual compression of an exhibition into a single day, together with the spirit of slowness, silence, and listening that animated KEΠOS, later convinced me to further restrict it to a single site-specific, intrinsically immersive installation in an unusual space, typically dark and secret, and opposed to the white cube concept of contemporary art exhibition spaces: the cellar.

An ancient cellar as the main site and material of the installation

Gaston Bachelard, in his *Poetics of Space*, describes the cellar as a dreamlike and subconscious place: "To descend into the cellar means to dream, to lose oneself in the distant corridors of uncertain etymology, to seek, within the very words, unattainable treasures." (*Poetics of Space*, 1975).

The cellar in question faces southeast at street level, near what remains of the ancient walls that once enclosed the village and near the site of the third gate of Fara, destroyed during the bombings of 1944. Yet the cellar is hypogeal compared to the main entrance of KEΠOS, being built on a slope leading to the monastery (originally a Lombard castle from the Early Middle Ages) of the Hermit Poor Clare nuns, which since 1673 dominates the panorama of Colle Buzio that characterises Fara.

The cellar - as the rest of the house - is entirely built of stone, visible and enveloping despite its sharp edges; the vaulted ceiling - behind the stone and lime - reveals remains of the reed matting, an ancient technique where reeds were used in construction to provide support and structure inside buildings.

Thus, the cellar was not a container of the work but an integral part of it through the air, the smell, the emptiness, the fullness of the walls, the stones, the reeds in the vaulted ceiling, the hand-made nails, other handcrafted metal forms firmly inserted between the stones, and various objects hiding forgotten stories to remember. It offered a deep and intense sensory experience that enveloped and stimulated the visitor to actively explore the artwork into which they entered.

The installation comprised objects selected from those recovered inside the house, small and large treasures telling lost life stories and holding deep emotions and forgotten memories, even the less comfortable ones. It acted as a portal to the hidden recesses of our unconscious.

Bachelard emphasises: "In our civilisation that brings light everywhere, that puts electricity in the cellar, it is no longer possible to go down into the cellar holding a candle. The unconscious, however, does not submit to any process of civilisation; it takes the candle to descend into the underground."

The visitor inside and outside

Inspired by this idea, I sewed a black cloth which I hung at the entrance to prevent sunlight from excessively penetrating and influencing the atmosphere I tried to create.

I placed candles of various sizes on the floor, shelves, and niches and lit them on the day of the event, allowing the installation to be illuminated "from within" as well as by their individual choice.

After welcoming guests - friends, acquaintances, and strangers, Italian and foreign, 32 in total throughout the day - I invited them to enter the installation individually. Before entering, I suggested a way to experience the installation: from left to right, though free and private with no time limits; I gave them a candle holder to enable lighting wherever their attention was drawn. I then took a photo of each visitor on entry - which remains private and serves only to mark the time of entry - and one on exit for the same purpose. Each visitor - surprised by this unusual method - cautiously entered while others remained outside whispering softly, so as not to disturb the visitor's experience inside.

Outside, in a recess of the walls by the street, I positioned a bench and a box serving as a table. On the box, I placed a tray of cookies provided by Loredana from the Mazzocchi wood-fired bakery, a wonderful 14th-century oven in the centre of Fara in Sabina, to entertain visitors waiting with a sweet and genuine local product.

The aesthetic experience is certainly personal, but this installation had nuances of so-called relational art (*Relational Art* by Nicolas Bourriaud, 2010), which emphasises direct engagement of the public and the building of social relations - even if spontaneous - thus reducing the importance of the artwork as a mere object.

The visitor on a solitary candlelit journey

Inside, after the initial shock of darkness and adjusting their sight to the candlelight in their hand and scattered around, the visitor could begin exploring the large rectangular room. On the short left side, they would notice an old white metal easel bearing a fragment of woven half-reeds used for plastering, an artwork in itself. Then three doors leaned against the wall: the first brown with a punched metal grille in the centre; the second also brown but plain; the third smaller and of faded blue. Inserted irregularly in the stone wall were a series of tea light candles; following them, items appeared in sequence: a burgundy wooden ball, a pale green painted wooden shutter latch, a black and white passport-sized photo of a man, probably from the 1950s or 60s. Next was a table covered with an early 20th-century bedsheet, placed perpendicularly to the long side dividing the room. Near the short side of the table facing the visitor was a mirror with broken fragments of decorated glass with gold curved lines placed on it, giving the impression the mirror was broken.

Around three sides were many ancient handmade iron nails, their heads emanating from the mirror giving the impression of a halo or rays. In the lower left corner was a broken hand-painted vase out of which was a piece of red sequinned fabric.

Near the table hung an ancient iron key from the ceiling with a hollow cross-shaped top, recovered from a large, old, heavy, twin-leaf chestnut door, ruined and irreparably worm-eaten.

On the right half of the room, beyond the table, behind two wooden chairs facing each other separated by an aluminum basin, were three wooden doors illuminated by numerous candles on the floor and in wall niches. The first door on the left was decorated with an old print of the Madonna with baby Jesus and a saint, surrounded by angels on a clouds background. The central door was larger, pale blue with a small guillotine-style window. The visit ended with the third door, smaller and narrower, decorated with an ancient print of Saint Philip Neri.

The visitor shares their experience

After each visit, I invited guests to sit with me and share their impressions, emotions, sensations, observations, and perceptions rather than interpretations or meaning constructions. I was interested in the sensory and emotional material elicited by the experience rather than frontal lobe rationalisations.

Common features emerged during feedback: impulses of curiosity or surprise; emotional flashbacks to imagined or vague as well as personal pasts; a sense of sacredness transcending the material; a playful and adventurous dimension in sensory apprehension of the space to be discovered; a feeling of familiarity from a past now remote and nearly forgotten; a sense of being enveloped or immersed in the space; even specific memories such as a 90-year-old lady recalling herself as a child sitting before her father with a brazier warming them; also emotions of discomfort like sadness, fear, loneliness, abandonment, and forgetfulness toward singular objects.

The average time inside the installation was five minutes, ranging from two to ten minutes. In this open, inclusive, relaxed, and private context, this contrasts starkly with seconds spent in front of a traditional museum artwork.

Why feedback after the visit?

Why conclude a visit to an exhibition with feedback? This does not happen in our traditional museum visits. Recently, I have been researching aesthetic experience and especially public engagement with artworks. This led me to psychological aesthetics, studying the deep, meaningful experience of the audience beyond the artwork's mere physical or visual aspect.

I feel that of the three A's of art (artist-artwork-audience), the third has been neglected over centuries and that only since the late 19th century - modernism, aesthetic philosophy, and especially postmodernism that freed us from material tyranny and power dynamics in the art world - has public aesthetic experience finally received the attention it deserves.

My installation - once experienced - was dismantled. It served its purpose, and the day after the event, I disassembled it. This was an important symbolic gesture emphasising the ephemeral nature of art transcending matter and intentionally escaping consumerism, commerce, and the risks of sensationalism or spectacularisation traditional art often faces.

The installation aimed to fully engage the visitor's senses and consciousness, creating a state of openness to sensory, emotional, mental, and mindful dimensions.

This psychological involvement, often called aesthetic empathy or illusion, allowed visitors to "enter" temporarily into the artistic dimension of the work, establishing emotional resonance and cognitive connection with the themes and sensations transmitted. It was a layered experience balancing sensory immersion, participation, and awareness.

Through sensory stimulation combined with conscious immersion, the immersive installation evoked emotional empathy, imaginative associations, and reflection. This deep engagement elevated the aesthetic experience, making it transformative, memorable, and meaningful.

Without psychological aesthetics, art risks being only spectacle or Instagrammable product; instead, by fostering emotional and cognitive involvement, it becomes a participatory encounter that can elicit profound personal and collective responses.