social sciences

MDPI

Article

The Micro-Politics of Artistic Production among Artists with a Migration Background

Golnesa Rezanezhad Pishkhani [1,*] and Mattias De Backer [2,*]

[1] Center of Gender and Culture, Ghent University, 9000 Ghent, Belgium
[2] Department of Criminology, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 1050 Brussels, Belgium
* Correspondence: golnesa.rezanezhadpishkhani@ugent.be (G.R.P.); mattias.de.backer@vub.be (M.D.B.)

Abstract: Based on two research projects in the Brussels-based artistic workspace and NGO Globe Aroma, this paper shows how artists with a (recent) migration background make sense of the arts and the space in which they are produced. Born out of a need to counter the dominant presence of men in this artistic workspace and create a welcoming environment, textile-making and live radio were used as means of reclaiming space, fostering solidarity, and sharing personal narratives. Textile-making, traditionally associated with domesticity, was repurposed for public exhibition, challenging the dichotomy between private and public spheres. Furthermore, the projects challenged neo-colonial dynamics and traditional research methodologies. While asking which (micro-)political meaning these artists give to their works and practices, the paper also reflects on the cultural thresholds experienced by migrant artists wishing to access hegemonic arts institutions.

Keywords: art practice; collaborative work; NGOs; micro-politics; aesthetics

Citation: Rezanezhad Pishkhani, Golnesa, and Mattias De Backer. 2024. The Micro-Politics of Artistic Production among Artists with a Migration Background. *Social Sciences* 13: 281. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13060281

Academic Editor: Nigel Parton

Received: 23 January 2024
Revised: 14 May 2024
Accepted: 16 May 2024
Published: 23 May 2024

1. Introduction

Culture is notably hard to define. Since the 1950s, an explosion of "cultures" has attempted, with varying degrees of success, to capture the lifestyles and expressions of certain social groups (De Backer 2019). "Youth culture" was first used as a concept by Talcott Parsons (Parsons 1942) in order to describe a set of professedly unique, distinctive patterns among young people. Later, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) developed a structuralist framework for understanding "subcultures", with the word "sub-culture" indicating a responsive, bottom-up initiative against "hegemonic" culture and its values (Hall and Jefferson 2006). Since the 1990s, studies concerning young people have given rise to terms such as "club cultures" (Thornton 1995), "nightlife youth culture" (Hollands 2002), and "lifestyles" (Miles 2000)–a series of terms often grouped as "post-subcultures".

Meanwhile, a more normative understanding of "culture" remains present in the background, referring to dominant values of "civilised" community (Clifford 1988). Anthropologists have expressed concern about how this notion of culture tends to generalise and homogenise; culture and arts are presented as being solid and timeless (see Abu-Lughod 2008; Appadurai 2013; Marcus and Fischer 1986). Such a notion aspires towards coherence in a shared canon (Abu-Lughod 2008), a perspective which may be said to be at odds with the complexity of today's world.

Culture also features as a normative concept in political discourse, referring to traditional Western cultures and a set of convictions, values, and habits that newcomers should internalise in order to be accepted in their host country. In practice, this view on culture materialises in the context of integration courses, in which newcomers learn about the habits and rituals they are expected to adopt. This phenomenon, in which the state takes control over everyday cultural practices, is reminiscent of what we called "micromorality" elsewhere (De Backer 2017; Eeckhout 2013), and which Foucault would refer to as "governmentality" (Burchell et al. 1991; Foucault et al. 2010). Indeed, according to Foucault,

governments operate to educate desires and configure habits, aspirations, and beliefs (Li 2007). Although this sometimes happens very explicitly and overtly, governmentality usually operates covertly, arranging things so that people, following their natural inclination and self-interest, will act as they ought to (Scott 2005).

While their everyday cultural practices are disciplined to a certain extent, migrants are also confronted with barriers when it comes to accessing to the art centres and arts institutions of the Western middle classes. These remain out of reach for financial reasons, e.g., because migrants do not have the economic stability and basic social wellbeing to be producers or audiences of art (see Sayad 1991; Martiniello 2022), or because their limited social and cultural capital affects their artistic expression. Furthermore, one can argue that immigrant artists are confronted with Western artistic frameworks, with a potential bias with regard to ethnic, cultural, and gender identity. It may be the case, for instance, that there is a hidden expectation towards artists with a migration background to express themselves using 'migrant' vocabularies or stereotypes. These elements are "major challenges relating to the politics of visuality, which focus on the way that certain identities become visible" (Keshmirshekan 2013, p. 151).

The above observations lead us to formulate the following questions:

How do artists with a migration background in Brussels experience their artistic work and its relation to the NGO in which it is made?
What roles do artistic and cultural NGOs, as well as invited professional artists, play in creating and inviting inclusive spaces and practices?
What (micro-)political meaning do these artists give to their works and practices?
To what extent does their artistic practice consist of resistance against the cultural and artistic norms in Europe?

Before going into the research projects upon which this paper draws, we provide some literature and philosophical reflections on the interplay between migration and arts, the aesthetic experience, the meaning of art, and the potential for micro-political expression.

2. Theoretical Background: Micro-Politics and Art

Discussions of art and aesthetics often introduce a distinction between art and craft. This division has roots in a rather animated debate held throughout much of Western history about what constitutes aesthetics. One dominant view in this regard has argued that artistic objects are primarily intended to stimulate thought. Therefore, the artistic experience requires a disinterested state of mind (Kant [1790] 1951). In this view, everyday objects cannot be considered as potential objects of philosophical inquiry. A subject engaged in functional and practical activities cannot be in a "disinterested" state of mind, and, therefore, cannot attain a purely aesthetic experience. This analysis coincides with the distribution of artistic production and consumption along socio-economic lines, as the productions of the middle and upper classes are presented in different forms and places and are labelled "art", whereas the more practical productions of the lower classes are considered "crafts".

In a recent contribution, Pierre Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) turns this Kantian analysis upside down by considering the aesthetic experience an "interested" activity, as it creates social value. This is in line with Ranciere's argument that the subversive power of aesthetics has, for a long time, been explored mostly in the context of artworks. Yet, it is only quite recently that the discourse of everyday aesthetics has been reaffirming its potential to affect the perception of the sensible (Vihalem 2018). Aesthetics has a double function: on the one hand, it allows us to perceive; on the other hand, it helps us to give sense to the perceived (Fajardo 2022). That is why, in Rancière's (1999, 2004) analysis, aesthetics is embedded in a discussion of politics, where political practice is regarded as an operator of emancipation, trying (in vain) to escape from the "police order" that attempts to "keep everyone in their place" (Epstein 1996, p. 202). The political subject is constituted in its relation to the social order through staging a dissensus (Schaap 2012). Bourriaud's and Rancière's respective analyses allow for a broadening of the artistic sphere and incorporating more diverse

materials and practices. It opens new ways for experimentation, interdisciplinary work, and political transformation.

Who is allowed to be visible and who is not is essentially a political question that materialises in the symbolic public spaces of parliamentary and media debates or arts institutions and historical canons, as well as in actual physical public spaces (Brighenti 2010). In both symbolic and physical public spaces, one group can consolidate power and hegemony over another group (Asad 2018), or groups of people can be marginalized and their right to the city denied (Mitchell 1995, 2003). In order to deal with this gatekeeping, one is presented with several options: one can abandon the negotiation or conflict by building alternative spaces and communities (e.g., Negri and Hardt (2000) and their notions of "Desertion" and "Exodus"), or one can engage in agonistic politics, in the belief that ignoring the existing art institutions and their hegemonic spaces limit the multiple avenues to open political engagements and subversion (Mouffe 1999).

A third option is presented in the model of collaborative methods, which has been widely applied in order to empower "subaltern" social groups. Some scholars criticise this approach as reproducing the hegemonic Western colonial ontology, neglecting the individual agency of these social groups (Mohanty 1988), or as potentially essentialising identities and relations (Cornwall 2003). Since the 1970s, the rhetoric of emancipation and empowerment has also been part of the rhetoric of art practices, first employed by the old avant garde that promoted the union of art and life, and then by curatorial programmes during the 1990s (Bishop 2004). Often, the impacts of these collaborative practices are limited to artist circles and a small number of gallery goers. In recent years, anthropologists like Appadurai (2013) have supported collaboration and believe that co-creation is about creating a social form. This approach has also been a main source of inspiration for design anthropology, according to which design takes place in a social context and can play a role in addressing societal issues (Resnick 2019). For design anthropology, this approach does not only contribute to the design of particular objects or services, but also creates new techniques and instruments for social engagement (Buur and Sitorus 2007; Halse 2013; Murphy and Marcus 2013; Suchman 2011).

To understand art practices as socio-culturally and politically transformative practices, we can also draw from the notion of everyday micro-politics, which one of us has explored earlier (De Backer et al. 2019; De Backer 2022b). This concept draws attention to mundane and everyday acts of political, cultural, symbolic, and social agency. While authors such as Mitchell (1995), Iveson (2013), Hou (2010), Holston (2009), and Houssay-Holzschuch (2016) have reflected on explicit forms of political behaviour and the explicitly political function of public spaces, the notion of "everyday" or "micro-" politics refers to mundane behaviour as sites of political expression, even if they are not explicitly intended as such.

Many theorists, when talking about politics, refer to these phenomena of political participation, which involve representative and deliberative systems, including "new forms of social organization—as transnational labor organizing, indigenous rights, and environmental justice movements [. . .which] are always creating alternative new spaces of and for public political expression" (Low and Smith 2013, p. 16). The study of micro-politics thus distinguishes itself from the study of politics with a capital "P" (Himada and Manning 2009). The latter, which is usually constituted as "the real deal", operates in a sphere of representation in which precomposed bodies are already circulating, uncontested, already formed and final. In other words, "[t]he micropolitical is that which subverts this tendency in the political to present itself as already fully formed" (Himada and Manning 2009, p. 5). The notion of micro-politics also resembles what Scott (2012) has dubbed "infra-politics", with political agency existing in everyday acts and behaviours and building up towards a massive effect.

3. Methodology

In 2017, the Brussels capital region numbered 1,191,604 inhabitants, with estimates adding another 120,000 inhabitants unaccounted for: asylum seekers, students, and em-

ployees of the European institutions (Hermia 2018). In 2024, the total number of inhabitants has risen to 1,222,637[1]. In order to provide an adequate estimate of the ethnic composition of the Brussels capital region, we can only rely on the available data on "nationality at birth" since the latest census data were collected in 2001. These data suggest that, among people with a non-Belgian nationality at birth, Moroccans form the largest group (12.6% of the population), with the French (5.7%), Rumanians (3.4%), Italians (3.1%), and Turcs (2.9%) completing the top 5. The most recent data, collected in 2017, also show that only 44% of Brussels inhabitants were actually born in Belgium, meaning that, since 2016, Brussels has become a "minoritarian" city, in which no single ethnic group forms a majority. Not counting the 44% of the population originally born in Belgium, 25% were born in another EU-28 country, and 31% were born in a non-EU country (Hermia and Sierens 2017). Furthermore, the Brussels capital region is characterised by an enormous gap between the rich and poor. In addition to this social division, the region is also divided across topographic lines, with wealthier areas literally rising above poorer neighbourhoods (Corijn and Vloeberghs 2009). This demographic divide takes the form of a sickle-shaped area covering the northwest of the city, which is commonly referred to as the "poverty crescent".

This paper is the result of research conducted in Brussels between 2019 and 2022 in an NGO called Globe Aroma. This NGO is an open arts house for artists and other individuals with a background as a refugee or asylum seeker. Its audience consists of professional and aspiring professional artists, as well as amateur artists or visitors seeking out culture or artistic workshops or simply looking for a convivial, homely atmosphere. This non-profit organisation, which is funded by the Flemish Government and the Brussels Region, and which is located in the Brussels city centre, offers a workspace to newcomer artists, functions as a meeting point for creative immigrants, introduces newcomers to what Brussels has to offer on a cultural and artistic level, and involves them in co-creation projects together with other Brussels organisations and the in-house artists of Globe Aroma.

The authors of this paper were involved in two of the NGO's projects, which ran parallel to each other. The first author collected her data in a co-creative project called "Getting softer", conducted between 2021 and 2022. During the project, she strongly invested in collaborative practice as a methodological approach to research. The focus of her project was to investigate how participants' artistic skills empowers them and enables them to create inclusive artistic practices. During 16 consecutive workshops, a collaboration was set up with other artists and practitioners with the goal to create a textile patchwork. Conversations and informal interviews were conducted with 10 women aged between 24 and 60, from diverse origins and socio-economic backgrounds, and with varying degrees of education, all of whom had a migration background. Analyses were based on transcriptions of the observations, interviews, and field notes during the meetings, collaborative works, and the moments when the project's outputs were presented.

The research conducted by the second author took place between 2019 and 2022 and was part of a broader European project funded by Humanities in the European Research Arena (HERA). The project included fieldwork in Newcastle, Amsterdam, Leipzig, and Brussels and investigated the everyday experiences of young refugees and asylum seekers in public spaces (EEYRASPS). In the project, a multidisciplinary conceptual framework was complemented by several, parallel methodologies: literature study, analyses of urban migration histories, museum ethnographies, media analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork (including interviews with young refugees and asylum seekers, as well as creative methods, such as walking interviews, mental mapping, digital storytelling, photo diaries, live radio shows, participant-on-participant interviews, etc.).

The second author conducted 13 interviews with young asylum seekers and refugees in other Brussels-based contexts. Additionally, diaspora artists in the NGO interviewed other artists as part of a co-creative radio show, which focused on these individuals' artistic practices and their affective, social, and material ties with the history and infrastructure of the Globe Aroma arts house. Many hours of ethnographic observation also contributed to the findings from the interviews.

The following sections are dedicated to the findings that emerged from both research projects.

3.1. The Meaning of Artistic Practice and the Art Workspace: Radio Globe Aroma

For the second author's research project, artists in the Brussels-based NGO Globe Aroma participated in the making of live radio, including the learning of interviewing skills, live sound mixing, and so forth. This project was set up to reflect on the art works that had been created in the NGO over previous years, a huge bulk of which was still stored in the various rooms and cupboards of the organisation. The collaborative project asked artists to reflect on their own work and how it interacted with the artistic space itself, i.e., with the human, affective, and material context in which their works took shape. In the preparatory sessions and during the live radio shows, artists interviewed other artists about these issues: how do they give a meaning to their artistic practice and how does that interact with the space in which art works are produced?

When talking with diaspora artists about their art and how they give meaning to their artistic practice, several of them stress the importance of art as an emotional outlet. Some also point out that sometimes art is merely something to be enjoyed.

> C: "I start from my emotion. We all have something we need to get rid of. It is good to let go of something".
>
> H: "I am a landscape painter. As simple as that—I just love landscapes".
>
> I: "I create for myself and for the pleasure of painting. It gives me peace".

Some artists would hold that their artistic production does not necessarily serve a higher purpose. This position mirrors the conviction in French artistic circles at the end of the 19th century, summarised in the slogan L'art pour l'art, or art for art's sake. This is a conception of art that states that the sole purpose of art is intrinsic. A work of art comes about autonomously and has no moral, didactic, or utilitarian function.

For others, producing art is closely related to belonging and claiming a place. J, for instance, places art in a historical perspective: "for 100,000 years people have been trying, it's the frescoes in the caves, it's a way of saying I was here and I belong to this place and I've been here. I've shared my story with people, I've left my mark somewhere in the city".

For some, it is about giving a voice to themselves or to a specific group or community.

> B: "It was one of the first paintings I did in a more abstract style. But I didn't do many in that style because I want to communicate something through my art."
>
> T: "It's difficult for me to dedicate my energy to making drawings and paintings just for myself. I cannot put my soul into it".

Lastly, there are artists who use their art to talk specifically about (autobiographical) stories of migration, though the theme of migration itself is definitely not a dominant one.

> S: "These works have to do with what exists inside of me, but also with the external reality, my experiences, my asylum request, the asylum centres I lived in. Also the boats in the Mediterranean which are related to my own stories and the things associated with it".
>
> M: "Some of my paintings and photos thematise the subjects of drugs and violence, showing people who suffer these difficulties. I have seen these things in the squats where I have observed people in this situation. My aim is to show this reality".

Importantly, the artistic practice is also described in relation to the space in which it is produced. This particularly holds true in the case of Globe Aroma, the Brussels NGO in which a part of our research took place. The art space is an affective space, it has an emotional impact. H: "For imagination to work you need a peaceful place. I came to Globe Aroma to find that place".

But this NGO is more than a place for making art works. It is a material place that offers support to artists in terms of earning a wage. It is a space of social contact:

> H: "Working together with S. was one of the most important things that happened for me at Globe Aroma, because I learned a lot and it connected me with the space".
>
> O: "The interaction with the others was also important. It was influential to meet other people at Globe Aroma. It became like a kind of family".
>
> I: "Because the works are exhibited in Globe Aroma, they still have a life. They bring people into contact with each other".

And, as many comment, that social contact in itself acts as a resource. S, referring to the work of the deceased fellow artist G., emphasises: "you see, life really is nothing. G. gave me a lot of materials and a lot of information. As artists we always need to be in touch with others—it's a necessity". N: "We are human, we are here, we learn together, and we move forward together".

In fact, this combination of a vibrant art workspace and a place of practical support is highlighted by S: "Globe Aroma is very exceptional as an organization. There aren't many places that are similar in that they offer a place for artists to work, meet each other and store works. They really offer support to artists".

3.2. Everyday Textile Making and Personal Archived Photos as Mediums and Mediators for Inclusion in Art Creation and Art Space

Around the same time as the project described above, the first author was also involved in research at the Brussels-based NGO Globe Aroma. The space had been increasingly dominated by men hanging out, without contributing to any of the artistic projects or to the conviviality of the place. Rather on the contrary, their presence was experienced as threatening for women and non-binary artists wanting to use the space. A field note recorded by the second author on 5 November 2019 states the following: "Globe Aroma feels more and more like a waiting room. Ten men are hanging out, scrolling the computer or their smartphones. Nobody is doing arts. There's just been a conflict between [artists] D and E. There was some shouting and now E has run off. Bizarre". A second field note, written on 18 December 2019, runs like this: "Globe Aroma has become a hypermasculine semi-public hang-out spot. We just had a conversation [with the NGO staff] about how the dominant presence of this group has made this space much less hospitable for the artists".

As a result of this conversation, the Globe Aroma staff and the first author set up a project entitled "Getting Softer". "Getting Softer" was a textile-based project in which the first author collaborated with other immigrant women who met every Thursday. The project utilized participants' textile-making skills along with materials containing signs, symbols, and images to transform the space in such a way that it would literally and figuratively become softer. The following paragraphs discuss the connotations and functions of these materials and how they facilitate the creation of inclusive spaces and art practices.

The researcher chose textile-making because it is an age-old practice of care for women all over the world. From conversations with the female participants, it can be deduced that textile-making includes a transfer of skills, knowledge, and power, from mothers and senior female weavers to their younger counterparts within the community, enabling them to create textiles for constructing domestic or communal spaces, such as tents, or for covering domestic spaces and bodies. Textile practices are deeply linked to body and space. According to these participants, the knowledge and skills of textile-making have been vital for everyday survival and have become a part of the heritage of many ethnic groups, as well as the cultural heritage of women.

In this project, through the continuity of textile practices, the participants built friendships and experienced a sense of community over the course of a year (the group was called "espace fxmmes", which translates to "fxmale space", with "x" signifying the inclusion of non-binary people). For example, every Thursday, while the group was creating textile

pieces to be used as curtains or for other purposes, they did not only discuss their creations; they also shared personal experiences and life difficulties, learning from each other and offering advice. The first author recalls a moment when one participant was experiencing difficulties in her relationship with her daughter, and others offered advice. In another instance, the women assisted a participant who was facing housing problems. Moreover, they claimed ownership of the space and made it their own through their presence, textile creations/experiments, by cooking and eating together, and by presenting their pieces. This resonates with some of the findings mentioned in the previous section, where the participants explained how the arts space, as well as the art production itself, had a social function and contributed to feeling supported (also on a material level).

For the textile project, personal photos and the textile-making processes were employed to draw attention to the boundary between the past and present, image and story, the personal and the collective, and between private and public spheres. The integration process in the West, one could argue, attempts to persuade immigrants that upon arrival, they should start anew, including in the production of everyday socio-cultural practices. Particularly in the lives of immigrants, their cultural practices are to be abandoned or restricted to the private sphere. One technique used in the workshops was to integrate a private picture, with very personal layers of meaning and memory, into a present-day and public work of art. For example, personal photos of one of the participants and her daughter were incorporated into a patchwork art piece. In the artwork, the hands of the mother were extended beyond the picture's frame, allowing her to touch her daughter's hands, by using embroidery. These new visual elements juxtaposed the private and public while expressing the "soft" affective relations between mother and child through the use of textiles.

Every session started with looking at these personal photos, selecting them, and explaining why a specific photo was chosen. These conversations, focusing on the emotional and affective connection with a picture and with a specific moment in the participants" lives, were experienced as therapeutic and empowering. Sometimes, these exchanges allowed people to find moments of healing for their pain, not unlike Derrida's (1998) description of the healing property of archival work in his "Archive Fever". Something similar was described in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic metaphor of the Wunderblock, according to which archives act as processes of remembering and forgetting/healing. Participants, by sharing what their pictures or symbols reminded them of, either forgot or relinquished the pain of missed, lost, and erased places, peoples, costumes, and their (hi)stories. For example, participant and artist A talked about cherries as symbolising the affective relationship with her mother, ''as two bonded cherries". Another example involved a participant incorporating pictures of her father during his time in the army, specifically during the Iran–Iraq war, to commemorate "those difficult days for their family and many others". These examples show how publicly presenting these photos in a collective (work) also creates a bridge between personal and collective experiences. At times, recounting these stories served as a powerful reminder of significant moments, empowering the participants through the retelling of images or signs. For example, T, who has a tattoo of a sheaf of wheat, shared her grandmother's story and focussed on "the strength of a woman who farmed wheat". Incorporating the personal photos of participants provided moments of healing and empowerment, as well as resistance against forgetting.

While textile-making is typically associated with domestic practice, this project specifically aimed to exhibit the work publicly. It was also produced in the (semi-)public space of the Globe Aroma workspace. Furthermore, the initial reason for setting up the project was to create a new welcoming space for women and non-binaries. The project's raison d'être was to transform, modify, and claim by giving a public platform to a typically private activity, transforming a less welcoming public space into a more inclusive space, etc. These acts, though not very explicit or eye-catching, have a rather clear micro-political meaning in the sense that everyday textile-making is repurposed as a disruptive method and practice that allows participants to claim their rights to a space for co-creation. By exhibiting the work

afterwards, it also receives monetary value, which is a subtle reference to these women's previous occupation as textile professionals and their inability to enter the labour market in their country of arrival. In fact, as R mentioned, "this was the first time they travelled (...) to Brussels without their family and for a job opportunity".

"Getting Softer" was a subtle project that used soft fabrics to soften a space, both literally and figuratively. The NGO's website claimed that using different techniques of textile design, such as weaving, batik, embroidery, and patchwork, would "create softer vessels of hospitality for the community of Globe Aroma, but also an opportunity to share stories, expertise and life". The project aimed to transform the space into a safe space and a platform of artistic creation for women and non-binary people. As one of the participants mentioned, "Thursdays bring the energy for the whole week, and I am happy to know this group and Globe Aroma". After the end of "Getting Softer", the artistic workspace had undergone a dramatic change: wooden panels divided the large room into smaller, cosier pockets, while curtains and cushions welcomed a wide variety of people into the space. On 10 February 2022, the second author noted: "there are more women now, the atmosphere is softer". Part of this outcome, at least, was the result of a collaborative thinking process among staff and with the researchers about the interaction between people and the built environment, and more specifically, about the effect the design and general "feel" of the workspace could have on the interactions that take place there.

4. Discussion

How do artists with a migration background in Brussels experience their artistic work? What role does the workspace play in creating inclusive spaces and practices? During the fieldwork, numerous examples were found of the participants claiming a space, feeling empowered and experiencing joy and belonging to a community, all as a result of engaging in artistic practices. In virtually all of these meanings attributed to artistic practice, the NGO functions as a facilitator and catalyst. It is a meeting point for various people with a background as newcomer: some of them are asylum seekers, refugees, or unauthorised migrants, others have a migration background but grew up in Belgium. Some are gradually becoming established (semi-)professional artists, while others have just begun to explore the possibilities. The mix of users brings about the possibility of networking and pooling resources, while the NGO itself also offers basic materials for artistic production, as well as a space of experimentation and a safe space for interaction.

Not every NGO in the field will consider this to be its role, but some may also adopt a more explicit (micro-)political position by acknowledging the everyday practices of immigrant craftswomen and craftsmen as contemporary art, by making sure that artists—"amateur" artists—are being paid for their contributions to artistic projects, or by supporting them to access art centres and galleries. The latter, one can assume, invites arts institutions to reflect on their gatekeeping policies in setting up their programmes, or the way professional artists are promoted at the expense of more marginalised artists. The NGO featured in this paper has adopted the policy of inviting migrant artists as teachers and trainers in their co-creation projects with other (often migrant) participants.

Which (micro-)political meaning do these artists give to their works and practices? How does their artistic practice engage in (explicit or implicit) resistance against Western cultural and artistic norms? As we saw earlier, some artists explained their art in rather socially engaged or political terms. They considered their art as a means to give a voice to themselves or to a specific group or community. Some artists used their art to talk specifically about (autobiographical) stories of migration and the harsh living conditions after arrival. Yet, this theme in itself is definitely not dominant, as indicated by the interviews. In line with the "art for art's sake" school of aesthetics, some artists consider their art to be valuable in itself, without there being an explicit goal of social change.

However, when looking at the interplay between artists, their work, and the artistic workspace in which it is produced, one can find hints of what could be called "resistance". Take, for instance, the NGO's specific choice to work with teachers and trainers in vulnera-

ble situations, with a migration background, and belonging to the working class. These choices have direct practical and financial implications, but they also have a more political meaning for an NGO that is constantly looking to further develop and operationalise its inclusive and empowering mission statement. This decision draws attention to the power dynamics (and potential neo-colonial dynamics) when it comes to the training and teaching roles within participatory projects, which often involve a white or Western trainer transferring cultural paradigms to immigrant artists.

This critique of the neo-colonial transfer of knowledge also has repercussions for research. For the project, the first author took the position of an apprentice, learning how to embroider or produce batik. The position adopted by the researcher is crucial here. We agree with the analysis that the collaborative method can be devised as a means to ignore the agency of participants or to essentialise their identities (Mohanty 1988; Cornwall 2003). Yet, we also recognise the strengths of a research practice that empowers participants through the acknowledgment and incorporation of their skills, knowledge, and the (soft) materials with which they have a strong affective relation.

This model, as Pablo (2011) suggests, requires prior conversations, and has to start from the conviction that the initiative for setting up a collaborative project must come from the group. In a painstakingly slow and vulnerable process, the second author negotiated access to the NGO and consulted with the staff and the artists to find projects that catered to the needs of latter, and where the interest of the researcher came last. This radical inversion of the traditional research process, so we felt, was the only way to interrupt neo-colonial patterns of extraction. Such a radical execution of collaborative work is often at odds with contemporary practices in research management and ethics procedures (De Backer 2022a).

Knowledge is a vehicle of power, Foucault (1998, p. 261) argues the following:

> [I]n a society, different bodies of learning, philosophical ideas, everyday opinions, but also institutions, commercial practices and police activities, mores—all refer to a certain implicit knowledge [savoir] special to this society. This knowledge is profoundly different from the bodies of learning [des connaisances] that one can find in scientific books, philosophical theories, and religious justifications.

Foucault's distinction between savoir and connaissance (or "knowledge" versus "understanding") gives power to those practical knowledges among communities that are seldom written down and even more rarely become a part of the cultural or historical canon of a people or a country. Artistic workshops run by people from minority groups do not only constitute an important symbolic gesture, they also actively unearth knowledge that may not have become visible otherwise. Elsewhere, Foucault adds that "savoir refers to the conditions that are necessary in a particular period for this or that type of object to be given to connaissance and for this or that type of enunciation to be formulated" (Foucault 2002, p. 15; see also Ruitenberg 2009). In other words, it takes a certain context for "minor" theory to become "major", to borrow Katz's (1996) terms. Moreover, this context does usually not appear by itself, nor does the necessary institutional change come overnight. Including embroidery skills into the project blurs the divisions among art, craft, and design, upsetting the division of "high" and "low" culture. One could say that mixing these various arts and crafts criticizes this division "from below". The norm and the gatekeeping practices surrounding it are resisted in the micro and the everyday.

Another example of micro-politics could be observed during the exhibitions, where visitors were invited to reflect on the stories behind the pictures, and spontaneous conversations started between visitors and artists about the memories, places, people, and cultural heritage informing their work. The interactions brought about a deeper understanding between the visitors and immigrant artists and helped to challenge the stereotypical narratives about migrants, which are typically framed either as fortune seekers or victims (Smets et al. 2019). The stories told, in interaction with the art works produced, showed an image of powerful artists, carving out a space for themselves, however temporarily.

The interactions during exhibitions, as well as the creation of a female space during the arts workshops, resonate strongly with de Certeau's (1984) understanding of strategies

and tactics, a distinction that foregrounds how power is always rooted in the (literal or symbolic, permanent or temporal) ownership of a place for oneself. For displaced people and newcomers in Western societies, being involved in art and culture can become a tactic, an action of resistance "in the absence of a proper locus" (de Certeau 1984, p. 37). Art production and cultural participation disturb what Rancière calls "the police order", by allowing those voices that are only perceived as background noise to receive genuine attention (Pirsoul 2017). Furthermore, this phenomenon of claiming a space also requires an intersectional analysis, as female artists with a migration background have an even harder time to engage in a tactic of visibility and place-making (De Backer 2022b).

5. Conclusions

The projects in the NGO Globe Aroma, upon which this paper draws, exemplify the transformative power of artistic practices, particularly in the context of inclusive spaces for immigrant women and non-binary individuals. The initiative, born out of a need to counter the dominant presence of men in the space and create a welcoming environment, utilized textile-making as a means of reclaiming space, fostering solidarity, and sharing personal narratives. Textile-making, traditionally associated with domesticity, was repurposed for public exhibition, challenging the dichotomy between private and public spheres. Through the incorporation of personal photos into collective artworks, participants found moments of healing and empowerment, resisting narratives of forgetting and erasure. These artworks not only softened the physical space but also facilitated emotional connections and community building among participants.

Moreover, the project's subtle yet significant impact extended beyond the physical transformation of the workspace. By foregrounding the voices and skills of immigrant artists, the project challenged neo-colonial dynamics and disrupted traditional research methodologies. It emphasized the importance of collaborative approaches that prioritize the agency and expertise of participants, contributing to a more equitable distribution of knowledge and power. Furthermore, the project's exhibitions provided opportunities for dialogue and understanding between immigrant artists and visitors, challenging stereotypical narratives and highlighting the agency and resilience of marginalized communities. In this way, artistic practices become acts of resistance, carving out spaces for visibility and belonging in a society where displacement and marginalization are pervasive.

The interviews and workshops with the artists clearly show that most artists do not use their work to directly communicate about their experiences of migration. Rather, they prefer to communicate as artists and hold very diverse opinions about the meaning of their art. The findings also suggest that an NGO such as Globe Aroma can provide space, a network, and resources to individual newcomers, immigrants, and refugees while supporting them in micro-political action. This contrasts with the difficulties experienced by diaspora artists in accessing more powerful artistic institutions. The artists in question are often working-class, experience financial hardship, or grapple with low levels of cultural or social capital. Moreover, these artistic institutions are inclined to idealise and essentialise the work of migration artists as migrant art, or as art about migration per se.

Alternative methods like collaborative work and practices, such as combining personal photos with crafting skills, facilitate moments for exchanging expertise and authorship and for establishing convergence between the everyday life of immigrants and their artistic or cultural production. This paper contributes to the growing body of scholarship in migration studies about the role of arts in shaping a sense of belonging and home. It shows how artists and cultural workers can play an important role in mobilising and transforming NGOs, art centres, and individual political agency to create inclusive art and cultural spaces, while providing alternative, affective spaces in the arrival infrastructure (Meeus et al. 2019).

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, writing—original draft preparation, review and editing, G.R.P. and M.D.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This article is (partly) the outcome of the funding provided by HERA (Humanities in the European Research Arena) grant number Hopkins.2.062. The EEYRASPS project, focusing on the Everyday Experiences of Young Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in Public Space, was a collaboration of scholars at the universities of Newcastle (Peter Hopkins), Utrecht (Ilse van Liempt), Leipzig (Kathrin Hörschelmann) and Liège (Hassan Bousetta). http://heranet.info/projects/public-spaces-culture-and-integration-in-europe/the-everyday-experiences-of-young-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-public-spaces/.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to the ethical review board's inexistence at the host institution at the start of the project.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

Acknowledgments: We wish to express our gratitude to the employees of Globe Aroma and all the participants for generously sharing their skills, creativity, and knowledge.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Note

[1] http://wijkmonitoring.brussels (accessed on 1 May 2024).

References

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2008. *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Appadurai, Arjun. 2013. *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*. New York: Verso.
Asad, Talal. 2018. *Secular Translations: Nation State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Bishop, Claire. 2004. *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*. New York: CUNY Graduate Center, vol. 110, pp. 51–79.
Bourriaud, Nicolas. 2002. *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Les Presses du Reel.
Brighenti, Andrea Mubi. 2010. Democracy and its visibilities. In *Surveillance and Democracy*. Abingdon: Routledge-Cavendish, pp. 67–84.
Burchell, Graham, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds. 1991. *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Buur, Jacob, and Larisa Sitorus. 2007. Ethnography as Design Provocation. *Ethnography, Practice, and Industry Conference Proceedings* 1: 146–57. [CrossRef]
Clifford, James. 1988. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Corijn, Eric, and Eefje Vloeberghs. 2009. *Bruxelles!* Brussels: VUB Press.
Cornwall, Andrea. 2003. Whose Voices? Whose Choices? Reflections on Gender and Participatory Development. *World Development* 31: 1325–42. [CrossRef]
De Backer, Mattias. 2017. *Young People, Public Space and Identity: A More-than-Representational Ethnography of Hanging out in Brussels*. Brussel: Vrije Universiteit Brussel.
De Backer, Mattias. 2019. Class, Style and Territory in the Drari Microcultures of Brussels. *Societies* 9: 64. [CrossRef]
De Backer, Mattias. 2022a. Co-constructing participatory ethics to address hierarchy and inequality: Social work ethics in research practice. *Qualitative Research* 22: 712–28. [CrossRef]
De Backer, Mattias. 2022b. Strategies and Tactics of Visibility: The Micro-Politics of Vulnerable Migrant Groups during the Pandemic in Brussels. In *The New Politics of Visibility: Spaces, Actors, Practices and Technologies in The Visible*. Edited by Andrea Mubi Brighenti. Bristol: Intellect Books, pp. 135–56.
De Backer, Mattias, Claske Dijkema, and Kathrin Hörschelmann. 2019. Preface: The Everyday Politics of Public Space. *Space and Culture* 22: 240–49. [CrossRef]
de Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The practice of everyday life (trans. Steven F. Rendall)*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Derrida, Jacques. 1998. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, 2nd ed. Translated by E. Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Eeckhout, Bart. 2013. *Hier mag niets meer. Wie verbiedt ons nog te vloeken nu God ons niet meer ziet?* De Morgen. 18th of December. Available online: https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/hier-mag-niets-meer~b6fec7dd/ (accessed on 1 May 2024).
Epstein, Debby. 1996. Keeping them in their Place: Hetero/sexist Harassment, Gender and the Enforcement of Heterosexuality. In *Sex, Sensibility and the Gendered Body*. Edited by Janet Holland and Lisa Adkins. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, pp. 202–21.
Fajardo, Christian. 2022. Jacques Rancière: Aesthetics, time, politics. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 14.1: 2049497.
Foucault, Michel. 1998. *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*. Edited by James D. Faubion. New York: Penguin Books.
Foucault, Michel. 2002. *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Foucault, Michel, Arnold I. Davidson, and Graham Burchell. 2010. *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982–1983*. Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer.
Hall, Stuart, and Tony Jefferson. 2006. *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
Halse, Joachim. 2013. Ethnographies of the Possible. In *Design Anthropology*. London: Routledge, pp. 180–96.
Hermia, Jean-Pierre. 2018. Baromètre démographique 2017 de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale. *Focus* 22.
Hermia, Jean-Pierre, and Astrid Sierens. 2017. Belges et étrangers en Région bruxelloise, de la naissance à aujourd'hui. *Focus* 20.
Himada, Nasrin, and Erin Manning. 2009. From Noun to Verb: The Micropolitics of "Making Collective". *Inflexions: A Journal for Research Creation* 3: 1–17.
Hollands, Robert. 2002. Divisions in the dark: Youth cultures, transitions and segmented consumption spaces in the night-time economy. *Journal of Youth Studies* 5: 153–71. [CrossRef]
Holston, James. 2009. *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Hou, Jeffrey. 2010. *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities*. London: Routledge. [CrossRef]
Houssay-Holzschuch, Miriam. 2016. Diss and ditch?: What to do with public space. In *Order and Conflict in Public Space*. Edited by Mattias De Backer, Lucas Melgaço, Georgiana Varna and Francesca Menichelli. London: Routledge, pp. 216–20.
Iveson, Kurt. 2013. Cities within the city: Do-it-yourself urbanism and the right to the city. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37: 941–56. [CrossRef]
Kant, Immanuel. 1951. *Critique of Judgment*. New York: Hafner. First published 1790.
Katz, Cindy. 1996. Towards minor theory. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14: 487–99. [CrossRef]
Keshmirshekan, Hamid. 2013. Reclaiming Cultural Space: The Artist's Performativity versus the State's Expectations in Contemporary Iran. In *Performing the Iranian State: Visual Culture and Representations of Iranian Identity*. Edited by Staci Gem Scheiwiller. London: Anthem Press, pp. 145–55.
Li, Tania. 2007. Governmentality. *Anthropologica* 49: 275–281.
Low, Setha, and Neil Smith. 2013. *The Politics of Public Space*. London: Routledge.
Marcus, George E., and Michael M. J. Fischer. 1986. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Martiniello, Marco. 2022. Researching Arts, Culture, Migration, and Change: A Multi (Trans)disciplinary Challenge for International Migration Studies. *Comparative Migration Studies* 10: 2–11. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
Meeus, Bruno, Karel Arnaut, and Bas Van Heur, eds. 2019. *Arrival Infrastructures: Migration and Urban Social Mobilities*. Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer International Publishing.
Miles, Stephen. 2000. *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.
Mitchell, Don. 1995. The end of public space? People's Park, definitions of the public, and democracy. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 85: 108–33.
Mitchell, Don. 2003. *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*. New York: Guilford Press.
Mohanty, Chandra. 1988. Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses. *World Development* 30: 62–88.
Mouffe, Chantal. 1999. Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism? *Social Research* 66: 745–58.
Murphy, Kevin M., and George Marcus. 2013. Epilogue: Ethnography and Design, Ethnography in Design Ethnography by Design. In *Design Anthropology*. London: Routledge, pp. 251–68.
Negri, Antonio, and Michael Hardt. 2000. *Empire*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
Pablo, Helguera. 2011. *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*. New York: Jorge Pinto Books.
Parsons, Talcott. 1942. Age and sex in the social structure of the United States. *American Sociological Review* 7: 604–16. [CrossRef]
Pirsoul, Nicolas. 2017. Identity Between Police and Politics: Ranciign Ethnogrspac Theory and the Dilemma of Indigenous Politics. *Critical Horizons* 18: 248–61. [CrossRef]
Rancière, Jacques. 1999. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Translated by J. Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Rancière, Jacques. 2004. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. New York: Continuum.
Resnick, Elizabeth. 2019. *The Social Design Reader*. London: Bloomsbury.
Ruitenberg, Claudia W. 2009. Distance and Defamiliarisation: Translation as Philosophical Method. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43: 421–35. [CrossRef]
Sayad, Abdelmalek. 1991. *L'Immigration ou les Paradoxes de l'Altérité*. Brussels: De Boeck.
Schaap, Andrew. 2012. Jacques Rancière: History, politics, aesthetics. *Contemporary Political Theory* 11: e10–e13. [CrossRef]
Scott, David. 2005. Colonial governmentality. *Anthropologies of Modernity: Foucault, Governmentality, and Life Politics*, 21–49.
Scott, James. 2012. Infrapolitics and Mobilizations: A Response by James C. Scott. *Revue française d'études américaines* 131: 112–17. [CrossRef]
Smets, Kevin, Jacinthe Mazzochetti, Lorraine Gerstmans, and Lien Mostmans. 2019. Beyond Victimhood: Reflecting on Migrant-Victim Representations with Afghan, Iraqi, and Syrian Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Belgium. In *Images of Immigrants and Refugees in Western Europe: Media Representations, Public Opinion and Refugees' Experiences*. Edited by Leen d'Haenens, Willem Joris and François Heinderyckx. Leuven: Leuven University Press, pp. 177–98.
Suchman, Lucy. 2011. Anthropological Relocations and the Limits of Design. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40: 1–18. [CrossRef]

Thornton, Sarah. 1995. Club Cultures: Music. In *Media and Subcultural Capital*. Cambridge: Polity.
Vihalem, Margus. 2018. Everyday Aesthetics and Jacques Rancière: Reconfiguring the Common Field of Aesthetics and Politics. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 10: 1–11.