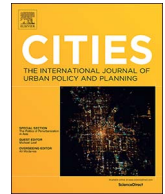




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Urban activism and migrations. Disrupting spatial and political segregation of migrants in European cities

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ABSTRACT

In the political context of the European “refugee crisis”, what role does art, and in particular artivism, play in disrupting spatial and political segregation of migrants? Artivism –activism through art and by art– brings together very diverse forms of creations which share the political purpose of social change. In this article, I intend to present creative experiments which all bring into play questions of unequal political rights, in relation to migrants and citizens in European cities. First, I analyse the role that the urban space plays in contemporary artivism linked to migrations. Subsequently, I propose to lay out a corpus, which consists of an exploratory typology of artist creations dealing with political rights in cities. Drawing on the analysis of several curatorial artist platforms, I identify and document artist creations (signs, architectural interventions, performances) that borrow from art, activism and social sciences, to disrupt urban and political segregation of migrants. The study concludes that artist works may have a practical potential for political change and urban transformation, when they are ephemeral and “ordinary”, disrupting the materiality and representations of everyday urban realities.

1. Introduction

In the political context of the European “refugee crisis”, renewed nationalism and the criminalisation of international migration, what role does art and urban artivism, in particular, play in disrupting urban and political segregation of migrants?¹ Precarious camps, slums, “jungles” (Agier, 2011) and squats are regularly built by migrants in European cities, and regularly displaced, destroyed and evicted by public authorities, while “migrant detention [mainly in urban detention centers] has developed constantly to become the preferred method of migrant population management in Europe and beyond since the 1990s” (Arbogast, 2016). If European civil societies as well as urban public authorities have also shown great abilities to innovate in the face of large-scale arrival of migrants, especially in Germany since 2011 (Katz, Noring, & Garretts, 2016), xenophobia and urban segregation remain structural political problems. Artivism – activism through and by art

(Lemoine & Ouardi, 2010; Lindgaard, 2005) – brings together diverse creations, whether they take the form of verbal or visual signs, graffiti, maps, installations or performances, that all have social change as their political purpose. According to Myriam Suchet, artivism “does not simply suggest new approaches to familiar urban situations and activities but rather enacts or operates new situations and new modes of actions. [...] The interval created by urban artivism[m] [...] must be understood, in both its temporal and spatial dimensions, as a delimited, ephemeral and disruptive event or space.” (Suchet & Mekdjian, 2016, 234). Thus, artivism can be understood as a critical process that destabilises everyday urban interactions and practices. In this article, I present several creative experiments whose *modus operandi* is the material transformation of urban situations and bringing into play questions of segregation and right of residence with respect to exiles, migrants and refugees. By presenting “some of the recent intersections of the political circumstances and aesthetic negotiations of geographical

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¹ The terms “migrants”, “refugees”, “asylum seekers”, “exiles” are often used interchangeably, especially in the media. However they are not identical. The International Organization for Migration (IOM-The United Nations Migration Agency) defines a migrant “as any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person's legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is” (IOM, 2011). In comparison, “asylum seekers” and “refugees” are legal statuses defined by the international Convention relating to the Status of Refugees: an asylum seeker is a person who seeks the protection and the legal status of “refugee” in a country other than his or her country of birth or residence, whereas a refugee is a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinions, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country. (Art. 1(A)(2), Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, Art. 1A(2), 1951 as modified by the 1967 Protocol). Finally, the term “exiles” designates neither a statistical category, nor a legal status. As Alexis Nouss explains, “exilience is both a condition and a consciousness. [...] One could feel in exile without really being exiled or one could be exiled without feeling it” (Nuselovici (Nouss), 2015).

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mobility” (Demos, 2013, 4), art historian T.J. Demos lists various functions of activism in the realm of migrations: “to discover innovative means to forge social bonds within transnational conditions that avoid sinking into regressive avatism or xenophobic hostility; to advance forms of life that reject the restrictive categories of identity and conventional modes of belonging; to direct the forces of mobility against the capture of commodification...” (*ibid.*). Amid such aesthetic and political intentions, what is the place of the city and of urban space? How can the city, an ambivalent space that both shelters and shuts in migrants, both a hostile and hospitable space, serve as a creative and subversive laboratory for activism?

The notion of hostility refers implicitly to the notion of hospitality. While hostility and hospitality seem antinomic, philosopher Magali Bessone shows that their meanings are actually intertwined: to “host” foreigners “constitutes both a protection of the foreigners and a protection against them. [...] As their common etymological origin explains (*hostire* means “to make equal”), to “host” is a way to compensate for a positional or situational inequality established between two persons, one being at home, the other one being outside of his/her home. Welcoming the latter as an equal is a way to reduce the risk attached to his/her presumed non-belonging” (Bessone, 2015). In other words, to be hospitable implies to presuppose a clear distinction and inequality between “home” and “not home”, “belonging” and “non-belonging”. The foreigner is always supposed to represent a potential threat that needs to be controlled by welcoming him or her as an “equal”. Therefore, hospitality presupposes an initial hostility towards foreigners considered as potential threats. Jacques Derrida also shows the ambivalence of “hospitality”, by using the neologism of “hospality”: there is “no hospitality [...] without sovereignty of oneself over one’s home, but since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence” (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000, 79). Here Derrida explains the very contradiction (in his term “*aporia*”) of the term “hospitality”, consubstantial of “hostility” and “violence”. While Derrida defines unconditional and unlimited hospitality (“the Law”) as the fundamental principle of ethics, he explains that political hospitality (“the laws”) can only be conditional, limited and somehow violent. Because of all these contradictions, Magali Bessone suggests to abandon the term “hospitality”: as she explains, such a demanding ethical imperative and an ambivalent concept cannot help to frame good practices. She suggests instead focusing on “citizenship”, as a political principle that should be based on the desire of participating to the collective conversation on political norms. Citizenship, she argues, should be distinguished from the question of belonging or not-belonging to a certain territory and therefore from the concept of “hospitality”.

Following Bessone’s argument, the main question here will not be to understand how activism can help build hospitable cities but instead how activism can help build cities which allow civic and political participation of all its users. In other words, we will question how activism can help disrupt the spatial and political segregation of the “undesirables” (Agier, 2011) in European cities.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, this work identifies an exploratory typology of activist interventions – works and performances – that seek to disrupt urban segregation of migrants in Europe. The corpus is based on first-hand activist experimentations made with people in exile in Grenoble (France) and second-hand information gathered from activist projects created in France, Germany, Hungary and Sweden, these four countries and their main cities -Paris, Berlin, Budapest and Stockholm- offering contrasted exposure and political reactions to the arrivals of migrants since 2011. If the study focuses mainly on activism in large cities, I included also Calais in northern France in the typology of works presented, as an archetypal place of spatial and political segregation of asylum seekers and refugees in Europe. Major refugee camps have been built in Calais since 2002 and were recently dismantled by the French authorities in October 2016.

The study could have included examples from the United Kingdom where activist groups, some of them in relation with the situation of Calais, have created interesting works. The UK however is less exposed than the other countries selected for this study by the arrivals of asylum seekers: in 2015, the UK received 38,878 asylum applications (including dependents); this was less than Germany (431,000), Sweden (163,000), Hungary (163,000) and France (50,900). The activist works selected have all in common to be ephemeral; they were not created to last as objects or images in the materiality of the urban space. I argue that this particular relationship to space and time is a condition for potential political transformations.

First, I analyse the role that urban space and cities plays in contemporary activism linked to migrations. Subsequently, I propose to lay out a corpus, which consists of an exploratory typology of activist creations dealing with migrations and urban citizenship. Drawing on the analysis of several curatorial activist platforms, I identify and document activist creations (signs, architectural interventions, performances) that borrow from art, activism and social sciences, to oppose urban segregation –both spatial and political-. The study concludes that activist works may have a practical potential for social change and urban transformation, when they are ephemeral and “ordinary”, disrupting the materiality and representations of everyday urban realities.

2. The role of urban space and cities in activism linked with migrations

Although cities are the first places of refuge for migrant populations, it appears that they have less visibility in activist works linked to migration than borderlands (Amilhat Szary, 2012). International boundaries, especially the outermost borders of the European Union, as well as the United States–Mexico border in the desert, are the focus of many activist interventions (*ibid.*). Borders are the hubs that make visible the national policies rejecting international migration. Walls, camps and surveillance systems are concentrated in these strategic places. A whole activist field linked with borderlands (Amilhat Szary, 2012; Parizot et al., 2014; Schimanski & Wolfe, 2010, 2017) seeks a subversion of biopolitics and the criminalisation of migration. In his work dealing with “the ways contemporary artists have reinvented documentary practices in their representations of mobile lives: refugees, migrants [and] the stateless” (Demos, 2013), art historian T.J. Demos builds up an important body of works and performances in which the city and everyday urban life are present but not the central objects of analysis. In his commentary on the exhibition “Out of Beirut”, presented in 2006 at the Modern Art Oxford, the author evokes the importance of the urban landscape and of daily life in Beirut in order to reflect on the representation of migratory processes linked to the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). Urban space is mainly considered as a reflection of social processes rather than as a direct object of subversion. In the curatorial activist platform of the antiAtlas of Borders collective,² dealing with migrations and borders, few artworks deal specifically with cities and urban space, despite the fact that geopolitical borders are political, juridical and material discontinuities re-enacted in cities. For example, the activist collective Hackitectura’s counter-mapping (2004) depicts the Strait of Gibraltar and includes the surveillance systems aimed at restricting migrants from crossing but does not pay any particular attention to cities. Among the works that question the place of the city in

² “The antiAtlas of Borders is an experimentation at the crossroads of research, art and practice. It was launched in 2011 at the Mediterranean Institute of Advanced Studies (Aix Marseille University), and has been co-produced by the Higher School of Art (Aix en Provence), PACTE laboratory (University of Grenoble-CNRS), Isabelle Arvers and La Compagnie. Since then, it has gathered researchers (social and hard scientists), artists (Web artists, tactical geographers, hackers, filmmakers, etc.) and professionals (customs, industry, military, etc.). The meeting between people from these different fields of knowledge and practice aims to create a radical shift of perspective in the way we apprehend both 21st-century borders and the boundaries separating fields of knowledge, art and practice.” (<http://www.antiatlas.net/en/>. Accessed 17.11.2016).

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