

shifting ground*

Art and Design Action for the Engagement and Empowerment of Migrant Citizens

This poster stems from a community-based art and design project entitled *Shifting Ground*, which was developed in 2019 and involved newly arrived and second-generation migrants, now living in the city of Cedar Rapids, USA. Based on participant's cultural heritage, the project addressed the creative process as a vehicle for dialogue and as a means of finding a sense of place in the new culture. The initiative started with a ludic interaction with the migrant citizens, followed by two ceramic sculpture workshops, and ending with an exhibition that brought together the participants and their families, some local artists and representatives of public authorities. The research focus mainly on the used methodology for the development of the co-creation work with the participants, particularly on the notion of action as a way to interact and develop the ceramic sculptures, as well as to promote the participants' social and cultural integration. In this context, the concept of *Action* is analyzed as a central characteristic of the artistic practice and as a political tool for the empowerment of a dislocated community.

Keywords: Community, Migration, Action, Thing, Participation.

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* The team that created the project, and guided the participants in the workshops was composed by us and Jane Gilmor.



1. community, visibility, participation

Through the *Shifting Ground* project we hope to empower and give visibility to undervalued immigrant groups in their community, and thus develop social and cultural sustainability. The idea of *Action* is associated with the concept of *vita activa*, created by the philosopher Hannah Arendt, which is developed around the notions of **Labour**, **Work** and **Action**. **Labour** is related to the human metabolism and serves as sustenance to life. **Work** is concerned with the artificialism that characterizes society, as well as the fabrication of something new.

2. action, citizenship, space of plurality

Action, which is related with the full exercise of citizenship in a space of plurality and pluralism, and necessarily mediated by discourse (Arendt 2001). Thus, the concept of *Action* is the basis of all human organization in the development of the two workshops, as it considers the multiple identities of all participants. It is also an activist *Action* capable of generating transformation, in particular, as a way of integrating migrants into a new culture.

3. a tool for community empowerment

Using the etymology of the Greek word *Archein*, which means "to begin", "to lead" and eventually "to govern", we can find a sense of *Action*, considering that the act of acting, in its most general sense, meaning to take an initiative, to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*). This premise allows us to establish an analogy with the concept of central *Action* of art and design practice inherent in the *Shifting Ground* project, which reinforces the political character as a tool for the empowerment of a displaced community.



4. beginners as constructors

There was an initial desire on the part of the artists to work with the newcomers to Cedar Rapids in order to enhance their cultures and help them integrate into the new place in which they live. All the synergies that were created between the will of the artists, the Ceramic Centre, other partners (social, municipal and religious institutions), immigrants and refugees, revealed that all the participants, because they were newcomers and beginners, took the initiative. They were led to act in order to carry out the project. In Arendt's words (2001, 190-191): "It is in the nature of the beginning that something new is initiated. This surprising unpredictability is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins".

5. the creative process as a form of knowledge

The creative process also worked as a form of knowledge - knowledge sharing and integration of the immigrant populations concerned. This process is a key feature of the participatory projects that take place with the contributions of participants other than artists. Focusing on the the notions of deterritorialization and identity associated with multiple relocations, the workshops began with a playful interaction with migrant citizens, characterized by their life stories and artistic practice based on ceramic technology. Words and actions inserted them into the interaction between all the participants, which did not result from a need, such as labor, nor was it induced by utility, such as work. Rather, it was stimulated by the presence of others to whom, each one of us, wishes to adhere (Arendt 2001).

6. sharing life stories through game

The first phase of the project focused on the idea of a game, in which each participant would have to share a memory, a talent and an object, the three elements being related to each other as well as to each other's personal experience. The reactions and ideas generated by the participants' perception gave rise to impulses for action, which was the creation of reliefs and sculptures. According to Arendt (2001), only with the revelation of the agent in the act, the action maintains its specific character revealing the 'who', the unique and distinct identity of the agent, transcending the mere productive activity and attributing meaning to the whole creative process and not only to the final product.

7. concerns as objects that unite people

Shifting Ground's participatory process involves creating things. Noteworthy is the notion of thing from the Actor-Network Theory, by Bruno Latour (2005), due to the performative, relational, plural, comprehensive and, simultaneously, dematerializing character that the meaning of the term implies. In the *Shifting Ground* project, also issues related to immigration, politics, cultural heritage, the willingness to give a voice to immigrants, the search for the integration of immigrants into a new culture, the sculpture workshops, among others, which brought us together and impelled us to act, are considered 'things' and 'matters of concern'. "The objects [or things] - taken as issues, unite us all in the way of mapping a public space profoundly different from what is normally recognized under the label of 'the political'" (Latour 2005: 5).



8. process as 'things'

The action of all participants resulting from the 'things' that brought us together triggered the two workshops, in the context in which games, sculptures, videos, photographs and installations were created, through a process of interaction based on listening and dialogue between all participants. All these pieces are also understood as "things", since they are the reason why people get together and associate with each other. "Things" emphasize the relationship of interdependence between people, the issues that move them and the possibility of new experiences.

9. creating 'things' to boost participation

Participatory approach projects are a constant process of producing "things". This concept of "thing" is perfectly intertwined with the very nature of the participatory *Shifting Ground* project, which by being open, based on the paradigm of listening and intersubjective vulnerability, ensures that the project is built by the interdependence of all participants, involving notions of respect, responsibility and trust (Reaes Pinto 2013).

10. participatory and relational approach

Based on dialogue as a way of giving voice to all participants, the participatory approach promotes a reciprocal relationship of experiences that expands from the individual to the collective of a community and leads to the constitution of identities based on the communicative process of our intersubjectivity (Gablik 1992). Interaction has a non-hierarchical, fluid, flexible and ethical nature, assuming itself in the context of the plural discourses of the people involved. What emerged was not only a participatory project, but also a relational one carried out by participants, institutions and citizens.

11. conclusion

Shifting Ground was based on an empathetic approach with participants enabling the development of co-creation work. The creative process focused on the concept of *Action* as a tool for citizenship and integration of a devalued community. The participatory process was characterised by the concept of Thing, involving concerns related to immigration, the participants' will and the development of sculpture workshops. Action and Thing emphasized the interdependence among participants, the issues that moved them and the possibility of new experiences based on respect, responsibility and trust.