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Borders Kill. Tania Bruguera's Referendum as an Artistic Strategy of Political Participation *

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Abstract:

Since the rise of modern nation-states, borders have played the important role to order society because they have the power to define territories, not only on the ground, but also on the level of the imaginary by shaping national identities and perceptions of the world. Borders can be intended not as places, rather as processes, as socially constructed and shifting structures of practices and discourses that produce norms of difference and exclusion. Within this context, arts, and particularly performing arts, can play a role in challenging these forms of representation, overturning the spectacle of the border into collective performances. Drawing upon these conceptual premises, the article presents the empirical insights related to Tania Bruguera's 'Referendum'. Referendum was intended both as a performance and as a form of political activism, inviting people to vote on the following question: "Borders kill. Should we abolish borders?". After analysing the collaborative procedure that led to the final results of the performance, we reflect upon the role of arts as pedagogical and political tool capable of changing the existing imagery on borders - and specifically on the Mediterranean Sea - and human mobility, stimulating new forms of debate and responsabilization in terms of co-citizenship.

Keywords: Border, Imaginary, Citizenship, Art, Political Participation.

* The authors worked together to the conceptualisation and construction of the article. Although, Pierluigi Musarò wrote paragraphs 1 and 2, Melissa Moralli wrote paragraphs 4, 4.1 and 4.2, Paola Parmiggiani wrote paragraphs 3 and 5.

*"We're Prisoners of War" Chacko said. "Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere.
We sail unanchored on troubled seas. We may never be allowed ashore.
Our sorrows will never be sad enough. Our joys never happy enough. Our dreams never big enough.
Our lives never important enough. To matter..."*
Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*

1. *The multiplication of borders*

Globalization is far from creating a "world without borders", as some people might have thought in the 1990s (Omae, 1990). In recent years, we have witnessed a multiplication of borders, also in the immediate sense of an increase in nation states. Borders, therefore, continue to play an important and often lethal role in the lives of millions of people. Around borders people die in many parts of the world: from the Mediterranean to the border between Mexico and the United States, just to mention the two most striking examples of the fatal relation between migration and borders (Mezzadra, 2018).

In the last 20 years, over 30 thousand people have experienced how fatal it is to feed the dream of the crossing if you start from the wrong side of the Mediterranean Sea. Thousands of ghosts whose voice does not reach us, protagonists of a tragedy that has transformed the Mediterranean into a liquid cemetery, the most dangerous border in the world.

For those fleeing wars and famines, poverty and dictatorships, the possibility of shipwreck is the price to pay for trying to re-exist (and resist) on the other side of the Mediterranean. Along the coast between Senegal, Libya and Turkey, men and women feel both desire to leave and nostalgia for home (Ahmed, 2014). Yet they do not give up. They undertake "the Journey" that lasts a few months or many years. A reality that often becomes a nightmare, transfiguring an even deeper abyss: the one that separates the migrant from the rest of humanity. A journey that breaks against the wall of the Mediterranean, in whose profound silence the stories of the media all over the world drown. Even if they present strong and moving images, capable of indignating or arousing pity, they dissolve like any event consumed between a click and some commentary on the

sidelines (Squire, 2014; Colombo, Murri & Tosoni, 2017; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2018).

Although European policies try to discourage aspiring asylum seekers through blockades, rejections, repatriations and communication campaigns ad hoc¹, the *middle sea - Mare Medi Terraneum* in Latin, the sea in the middle of the land - that the Romans called *Mare Nostrum* - still attracts thousands of people seeking for a better life.

More than a border between Africa and Europe, the Mediterranean is a "liquid continent". In this sense, for example, Braudel (1986, p.55) recognizes the dual nature of the Mediterranean: barrier that extends to the horizon and at the same time of a place that unites, common denominator of trade exchanges between populations sharing the same habits and paces of life.

The Mediterranean has also become the theatre of diasporas and conflicts, hopes foundered in the form of massacres, human trafficking, arrests and solidarity. Although international agencies such as UNHCR, IOM, and the EU High-Level Working Group on Asylum and Migration acknowledge that asylum seekers travel side by side with people fleeing from poverty and seeking better opportunities, most European states are keen to show they are differentiating between asylum seekers escaping war, and those seeking a better life. This blurred distinction between forced and voluntary migration is at the basis of policy-making and is crucial for the future of newcomers. In order to prevent irregular arrival of asylum seekers, several states of the "Fortress Europe" have invested massively in border control, and made bilateral agreements for externalisation of borders (the EU-Turkey agreement on March 2016 and the Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and Libya on February 2017, among others). European governments from both sides of the political spectrum have enacted draconian measures to prevent, deter, and punish those engaged in the smuggling of migrants – both as smugglers and smuggled migrants (Andersson, 2014).

Despite the importance to inform citizens about what is happening in the Mediterranean area, the ways media report on migration and EU

¹ For further information: <https://openmigration.org/en/op-ed/dangerous-journey-limited-effect-of-information-campaigns-to-deter-irregular-migration/>, last access on 17/07/2019.

policies and practices often contribute to create a categorisation of migrants as voluntary/forced, desirable/undesirable, and legal/illegal. In their attitude to report uncritically the political discourse on the “invasion” of migrants crossing the EU border, media often contribute to normalise the extraterritorial border by negatively stereotyping migration, or even criminalising *ita priori*. Moreover, this media uncritical approach not only deny the difference between people who have the right to ask for asylum and economic migrants who cross the border without a regular visa. They also reduce the complex narrative of human migration into simple dichotomies of good and evil, fostering, in turn, bad policies that put migrants at risk while, at the same time, empower criminal organisations.

Moving from the theoretical assumption that nowadays the border seems to break down and then recompose itself, often in lethal ways on the bodies of men and women in motion, this article aims at exploring how arts, and particularly performing arts, can play a role in challenging these forms of representation, overturning the spectacle of the border into a political collective performance. In this sense, arts can represent a space to reflect critically on the denial of rights during migration, as well as on geopolitical relations and marginalizing migration policies (Mirzoeff, 2011; Papastergiadis, 2013). Drawing upon these conceptual premises, the article presents the empirical insights related to the performance “Referendum”, presented by Cuban artist and activist Tania Bruguera within the international festival “Atlas of Transitions | Home”². This festival was organized in Bologna in the frame of the project “Atlas of Transitions. New geographies for a cross-cultural Europe”, aiming at promoting alternative representations of human mobility and cultural diversity in European cities. *Referendum* was intended both as a performance and as a form of political activism. Lasting ten days, it implied the activation of an urban referendum campaign that invited people to vote on the following question: “Borders kill. Should we abolish borders?”. After analysing the collaborative procedure that led to the final results of the performance, we reflect upon the role of arts as pedagogical and political tool capable of changing the existing imaginary on borders - and specifically on the

² <http://bologna.emiliaromagnateatro.com/atlas-of-transitions-biennale-home/>, last access on 16/07/2019.

Mediterranean Sea. In fact, we argue that in order to understand the meaning (and functioning) of borders, it is necessary to look at their processes of "externalization" and at the symbolic aspects of bordering, to unveil the typical narratives of mainstream media and politicians, overcoming the stereotyped imaginary of the humanitarian or securitarian approach. On the other hand, arts become a new public agora, an interactive arena where different ideas, opinions, insights on conflictual phenomena, such as borders, stimulate a renovated individual and collective responsabilization in terms of co-citizenship (Balibar, 2003).

2. The physical and symbolic dimensions of borders

Combining the freedom of movement within the Schengen space with the control of external frontiers, the 1990s are marked as the period when the EU began tightening and militarizing its borders (Bigo, 2002; Mezzadra & Nielson, 2013). The last decades are, indeed, characterized by a justification of the massive investments in border controls through the narratives of national security – combating human smuggling and potential terrorists – as well as through the humanitarian narratives – the rescuing of asylum seekers' lives (Albahari, 2015).

As we have shown in other articles (Musarò, 2017; Musarò & Parmiggiani, 2018), media performances contribute to shaping the Mediterranean border as an emotional and physical setting in which fears and insecurities can be used to produce and perpetuate the colonial geographies of exclusion.

Nevertheless, since the rise of modern nation-states, borders have played the important role to order society because they have the power to define territories and delimit the geographies of nations. This happened not only on the ground, but also on the level of the imaginary, by shaping national identities of people and their perceptions of the world. Therefore, borders and the process of bordering are not only social phenomena, but they are also essentially political, which makes the border making a strategy to control both imaginary and real space, governing the "borderlands" (Agier, 2016). Borders can be intended not as places, rather as processes (Vaughan-Williams, 2015), socially constructed and shifting

structures of practices and discourses that produce norms of difference and exclusion across bodies and voices of would-be migrants (Musarò, 2017), sustaining projects of geo-political sovereignty. As technologically driven process of rhetorical identification and control (Chouliaraki & Musarò, 2017), the process of bordering thus systematically produces its own “discursive or emotional landscapes of social power” (Anssi Paasi, 1996).

Stressing the elasticity of borders and the symbolic dimensions of the bordering practices helps to define the perspective from which borders can be studied today. Although borders are often conceptualized as stable lines drawn on maps, we should acknowledge that the representation of borders as lines is an invention of European modernity). In fact, the drawing of these lines is the condition for the existence of the state territory and therefore has a *constitutive* function in relation to the state (as well as to “the people” who live there and to the citizenry that establishes their rights). However, more generally, the history of the linear border is intertwined with the history of European colonial expansion – with the continuous opening of border areas (often related to the genocide of native peoples), with the protean geography of imperial rules and, finally, with borders drawn with set square and pencil between the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 and the Sykes – Picot Agreement (Giordana, 2018).

There is now a rich literature exploring the extraterritorial border management, focussing on two different aspects of this practice: the securitization of territory adjacent to physical borders and the topologies of biopolitics governing racialized bodies.

Several scholars have documented the extraterritorial “stretching of borderwork” (Casas, Cobarrubias & Pickles, 2010) through transnational statecraft manifesting securitized territories as “buffer zones”, alternatively defined archipelagos (Mountz, 2011), or borderlands (Agier, 2016), among others. At the same time, research documenting the biopolitics dimension of the border management tends to emphasize the disciplining of undesired migrants through the toll deflection, detention, surveillance and deportation of migrant bodies (Agamben, 1998; Feldman, 2010; Amore, 2013).

On the other hand, what requires greater attention is how states attempt the symbolic control of unwanted migrants, the use of extraterritorial subjugation as a practice of pre-emptive border security, how governments implement border externalizations through extraterritorially acting upon

people's perceptions of migration, including depicting irregular migration in a negative light. Yet, these symbolic and imaginary dimensions of border externalization have received little scholarly consideration (Collyer & King, 2016).

Beyond the physical aspect of the border, thus, it is fundamental to consider its symbolic dimension. Images and discourses reporting the European ways to tackle the "migration crisis", while illegalizing those who attempt to cross the border - focussing on their endeavour in terms of risks, death, prohibitions, acts of breaking the law, failure of the arrival - are part of how the media and communication contribute to shape the border (Cuttitta, 2014).

The media portrayals of people crossing the border, through narratives and images of security and salvation, for example, can be understood as representational barriers, that construe their identities as "desirable" or "undesirable". We can define it the "narrated border", which is part of the wider "mediatized border", intended as a regime of reception characterized by the digital fusion of caring compassion and military protection from mobile populations, which results from mediated practices. In other words, assuming mediatization as a process in which "the media exert a particularly dominant influence on other institutions" (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 13), we can describe the mediatized border as a techno-affective network of mediations around migrants and refugees, where emotions of fear and empathy co-exist through digital connectivities, ritualizing our relationship with the other and sought legitimation of the territorial border through discourses of difference and superiority.

Thus, to capture the symbolic and affective role of managing human mobility through a necropolitical approach (Mbembe & Meintjes, 2003), we need to explore and unveil how these emotional spatial imaginaries are extraterritorially disseminated by the states to symbolically normalize certain territorial relationships. Through their normalization, spatial imaginaries (re)shape social perceptions about places and people, being used as a "positive power" by the states to normalize human behaviour. A power that contributes to aid the policing of migration, through the shaping of the choices and desires of people.

Within this context, in the next sections we will examine how arts, and particularly performing arts, can challenge these power(full) structures,

while sustaining operations of de-bordering in a dual sense: a de-bordering of the ways borders are narrated and represented, in their physical, symbolic (and mediatized) interpretations, as well as a de-bordering of the spaces of responsibility and resistance through creative actions (Giudice & Giubilaro, 2014; Moralli, 2016).

3. *Atlas of Transitions. New Geographies for a Cross-cultural Europe*

Atlas of Transitions is a European project co-financed by the European programme "Creative Europe" which includes ten partners in seven countries - Italy, Albania, Belgium, Poland, France, Greece and Sweden - The partners involved in the project are mainly theatres and cultural organizations that collaborate with a network of university stakeholders. The network has the aim to investigate the relationship between migration and performing arts through the methodology of action-research (McNiff, 1998; Levy, 2017), sharing different methodologies and knowledge. ³Through an innovative use of performative practices, the project intends to challenge the stereotypical imagery conveyed by the mediatisation of contemporary migratory phenomena, working on new ways of perceiving public spaces and coexistence between European citizens, migrants and refugees. For these reasons, the project develops both a part of artistic action on the field, and a part of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research that involved artists, curators, researchers, migrants, students, citizens.

As a consequence, the project deals with performing arts and migration through different perspectives: it alternates theatre performances with bottom-up urban itineraries created by asylum seekers, public meetings on the theme of borders and the right to mobility, participatory dj-sets in suburban areas, but also installations, workshops on movement, conferences, and shared actions of political activism.

In Italy, the project was developed in the city of Bologna by Emilia-Romagna Teatro Foundation, the artistic collective Cantieri Meticci and the

³ The list of the partners included in "Atlas of Transitions" can be found at: <http://www.atlasoftransitions.eu/partnership/>, while list of academic institutions at: <http://www.atlasoftransitions.eu/research/>, last access on 15/10/2019.

University of Bologna. Here, the action-research began with an exploratory phase of context analysis, at national and local level, on the phenomenon of migration and ethnographic observation of the artistic workshops carried out in the city of Bologna by the collectives Cantieri Meticci and Zimmerfrei, accompanied by in-depth interviews with artists, curators, participants and activists.⁴ On the basis of this first analysis, the research-action has provided different tools including meetings between all stakeholders involved, interdisciplinary conferences and seminars on project issues, public debates open to citizens, workshops and art workshops, training in high schools and university courses, involvement and comparison with the communities of migrants in the territory of Bologna. The analytical framework was completed by the administration of questionnaires (230 in total) to the audience of two festivals held in 2018 and 2019.

The first festival, "Right to the City", which took place in the city of Bologna from 15 to 24 June 2018, focused on the theme of the right to the city as the right of all to live, to participate and to re-inhabit symbolic and physical urban spaces (Lefebvre, 1968). The second festival, "Home", which animated the city from 1 to 10 March 2019, dealt with the concept of "home" conceived as feeling to feel at home or being away from home, starting from the reflection of Ahmed (2014), which proposes to overcome a reading and a representation of the migrant as "ontologically uprooted". A perspective that, on the basis of a feminist and post-colonial approach, tries to challenge ethnocentric narratives for which migrants are seen as an indefinite category that belongs nowhere, and primarily to a Europe with borders fortified by the Schengen agreement.⁵

These conceptual frameworks were therefore used as narrative expedients to reflect on issues such as identity, belonging, inclusion, borders and citizenship. The primary objective of the project was to try to deconstruct the imagery conveyed by stigmatising media and political

⁴ The participating observations continued throughout the duration of the project but were concentrated mainly in the first seven months (November 2017- May 2018). Moreover, a total of 47 in-depth interviews were carried out.

⁵ The specific projects developed within the two festivals are reported at: <http://bologna.emiliaromagnateatro.com/right-to-the-city/> and <http://bologna.emiliaromagnateatro.com/home2019/>, last access on 17/10/2019.

rhetoric. Images that represent migrants as victims to be saved (fuelling an imbalance of power and conveying pietism), or as invaders to be rejected (supporting a criminalization of diversity and growing episodes of “everyday racism”). Themes capable of stimulating connections and cognitive effervescences, that convey different ways to reflect on social inequalities linked to the right to move. But, also, collective experiments of new forms of social integration capable of enhancing diversity.

Among these projects, in the next sections we will explore a specific project entitled “Referendum”, proposed by the Cuban artist⁶ Tania Bruguera during the festival “Home”, held in 2019. In particular, we will present the results of the analysis undertaken during the realization of the performance and the public debates that preceded the performance. These results have to be considered as part of the action-research presented above, coordinated by University of Bologna, involving both the project’s partners and the academic stakeholders.

4. *Referendum*

In our theoretical framework we have argued that some of the most intense conflicts of our time are taking place around borders, creating symbolic borders which are transformed into spaces of everyday exclusion. Tania Bruguera's artistic interventions refer to this conceptual macro-frame, seeking to intervene politically through art and its institutions. Drawing upon a Critical Institutional approach, Tania Bruguera combines her role as an activist with that of artist (artivism)⁷. Among the main projects, she

⁶ “Artist” is a portmanteau word combining “artist” and “activist”.

⁷ Tania Bruguera creates performances and installations that address global issues related to power, migration, censorship, repression, examining the effects on the lives of the most vulnerable individuals and communities. Her interventions investigate the possibility of transformation of institutional structures, of collective memory and education in the broadest sense. Through participatory practices that overturn the role of citizens from mere spectators to “active actors”, her works target and reveal the effects produced by the work of political power on societies. She received an Honorary Degree from the School of the Art Institute in Chicago and was the first artist-in-house of the New York City Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, <http://bologna.emiliaromagnateatro.com/spettacolo/tania-bruguera-referendum-2/>, last access on 12/07/2019.

founded the Immigrant Movement International, based on acts of protest, participatory formats, workshops, meetings, works on the issue of migration.⁸ Another interesting project, *Arte Útil*, was developed by Tania Bruguera and curators at the Queens Museum, New York, Van Abbe museum, Eindhoven and Grizedale Arts, Coniston. *Arte Útil* case studies show how arts can help to deal with issues that were once the domain of the state, depicting this process as part of a larger historical trajectory that is now shaping our contemporary world. A trajectory where self-organised groups, individual and collective initiatives bring to new methods and social strategies in order to answer emerging issues, intervening directly on the field.⁹

On the basis of a shared perspective of arts as a space of political intervention, Tania Bruguera was invited to propose a collective performance during the festival "Atlas of Transitions | Home",¹⁰. The artist proposed the project "Referendum", a performance lasting ten days in the form of an urban referendum campaign.¹¹ In particular, *Referendum* represented an invitation to vote and to reflect on a question concerning migration and borders, originated from a public and militant debate that engaged local organizations, activists, social workers, citizens. For the whole duration of the festival "Home", everyone could vote in different parts of the city, while a scoreboard marked the daily results of the referendum, making visible the urban response to the question and monitoring the choices of the participants. *Referendum* engaged students,

⁸ <http://immigrant-movement.us/wordpress/>, last access on 13/03/2019.

⁹ <https://www.arte-util.org/about/colophon/>, last access on 24/08/2019.

¹⁰ The characteristics of the audience attending the Festival will be illustrated in a further publication. However, the questionnaires collected (108 in total) showed that the 47, 54% of the audience was used to attend performing events between 0 and 4 times/year. Moreover, the audience was mainly composed by women (67,21%) between 19 and 35 years old (54,10%). In relation to the nationality, 81,1% of the audience was Italian, 2,5% UE citizens and 3,3 % extra-UE citizens. However, since the audience who voted during *Referendum* could not be examined within the general audience of Home Festival, the number of non-Italian participants could be much higher (particularly because the voting polls were positioned in different parts of the city of Bologna).

¹¹ For further information on the collaboration of Tania Bruguera within "Atlas of Transitions | Home", please visit: <http://www.atlasoftransitions.eu/cuban-artist-tania-bruguera-in-bologna-with-2-projects/>, last access on 17/09/2019.

activists, refugees, tourists, researchers, artists in different parts of the city, proposing a collective exercise in order to re-think the conceptual meaning of the “border”.¹²

Before Bologna, Tania Bruguera performed *Referendum* in Toronto (2015) and in New York (2016), but, as we will see, the performance in Bologna was developed in a different way, giving citizens the possibility to re-think and transform the initial statement/question and to participate to public debates on issues such as freedom of movement, borders and rights. In fact, differently from the previous experience, the project in Bologna was conceived as a participatory project consisting in six (only partially consecutive) main phases: the organization of open public discussions held in Bologna at the *Arena del Sole* theatre, where the participants were invited to discuss the statement and the question to be used in the “artist” performance; the training of the volunteers and students assisting in the voting stations; the promotion of the project through site-specific posters in different areas of the city; the realization of the “referendum” with static and mobile voting positions in the center and in the periphery of the city of Bologna; the organization of six open discussions during the duration of the performance and the presentation of the results in a final event.

4.1 Debordering Imaginaries

Borders limit and connect. They exclude and set the conditions for inclusion. Since the mythical story of the foundation of Rome, the walls, whose boundaries often surround each other, are bathed in blood (...). Originally characterized by a plurality of meanings (delimiting the sacred from the profane, the good from the evil, one private property from another), the border progressively assumes a specific political value in European modernity, marking - through its representation as a line in the maps - the territories of states and performing various functions in facilitating colonial expansion. It is this linear image of the border that still today organises our geo-political atlas, the map of the world with which we are familiar.¹³

¹² *Referendum* was attended by 2,519 voters, but the people involved in all the phases of the performance are many more, as we will discuss below.

¹³ <http://bologna.emiliaromagnateatro.com/spettacolo/tania-bruguera-referendum-2/>, last access on 16/08/2019.

On Festival's website, Referendum's description begins with these words. Suggestive words of reflection, disruptive imagination, critical deliberation, echoing and explicating the inequalities linked to the misfortune of being born on the wrong part of the (socially constructed) atlas. In these words, but especially in the main statement/question driving the referendum ("Borders kill. Should we abolish borders?"), the aim of this artistic intervention is clear: to challenge mainstream narratives on borders, to unveil power imbalances in the mobility justice (Wihtol de Wenden, 2013; Sheller 2018), in a world where some are dying to cross symbolic and physical borders and others are buying passports as part of economic and political strategies (Abrahamian, 2015).

This ambition started before the performance itself: in the weeks preceding the public performance, Tania Bruguera asked the curator of the festival, Piersandra di Matteo, to open the artistic intervention to the people¹⁴, letting them to decide whether change the statement and the question. Inviting them to rethink the project in line with the Italian context and recent political events¹⁵, the artist underlined how arts can represent a flexible mechanism of collective reflection on actual political and social challenges (Mouffe, 2007; Martiniello, 2016; Smithner, 2019). At the same time, Referendum became a space of political participation, sustaining the direct intervention of social actors in an artistic politically-oriented project, as we will see in the second section of this paragraph.

One half month before the performance, three public consultations were organized (January 2019) at the theater Arena del Sole (Bologna), between 8 p.m. and 11 p.m., experiencing the participation of about 40 people for each meeting. These occasions were not only important moments of discussion that led to the (partial) reconfiguration of the initial project, but they represented, primarily, fertile ground of open debates on actual political

¹⁴ The people who participated in the meetings were from civil society organizations, individual citizens interested in the topic, activists, migrants, students, researchers, local administrators.

¹⁵ In winter 2019, when the project was developed, Italian minister of Interior had recently promoted a new Decree-Law on Immigration and Security, an anti-migration decree causing a growing social exclusion of newcomers and a formal criminalization of NGOs, declaring that Italian ports were closed for migrants. These acts worsened the situation in the Mediterranean Sea, making this liquid border even more dangerous than before.

facts and events. In other words, they became fundamental moments to discuss about borders, rights, citizenships, exclusion, conviviality.

The process itself was interesting¹⁶. During the meetings, different considerations on migration and borders arose. Among others, discussing about the statement and the question to be adopted for the Italian Referendum was also a reflexive mechanism to reflect about borders and the inequality of lives. In this case, the participants discussed about how borders are socially constructed, becoming mediated borders where images and narratives shape and legitimize unequal geographies of the world (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2017). Thus, one of the first issues faced during the public meetings concerned the deconstruction of the border as a fixed reality, questioning its nature and its socially embedded character. As an example, a participant stated:

“We should ask ourselves what breaking down a border means: if the border is intended as something material it is easier, but if it is of another kind you must first of all make it visible, politicize it, understand what that border is like. It is necessary to make the border visible to identify the forms of struggle. My suggestion would be to find another question that is just as dry, but that keeps in consideration the difference between diverse types of border” (participant C.).

In fact, as we argued in our theoretical framework, the concept of the border is something deeply complex and frequently disorienting. As a consequence, the risk could be that of taking into consideration only the geopolitical or physical dimension of borders, minimizing their symbolic and psychological facets.

However, as we stated, borders are essentially mediated. They are constructed not only through wars, internal conflicts, international treaties and economic agreements. They are narrated, represented, imagined. In other words, borders are also shaped by social imaginaries (Abruzzese & Borrelli, 2000), expressed in images (visual or symbolic), as well as in interpretative categories. Images and categories that reveal a specific vision of the world represent simplifications of social life, influencing common

¹⁶ The three meetings were analysed through the technique of participating observation. During the meetings, we focused mainly on the participants' perceptions about borders, relational dynamics, interactions among “experts” and “non-experts” in the form of knowledge co-construction.

sense (Jedlowski, 2005). In the case of borders, as many authors sustain, these social imaginaries are mainly linked to a dual perspective, securitarian and humanitarian (Walters, 2011;Albahari, 2015), supported by mainstream political and mediatic rhetoric, and leaving a very narrow space for other interpretative perspectives and voices.

Through the disruption of a "simple" and direct question, Referendum broke these dualistic representation strategies, stating that borders kill and that everyone is called to do something (or at least reflecting on their role in such a setting). A call to reflection and, potentially, action, that invited, even before the general public, the participants to the meetings who underlined the importance to include, in the formulation of the statement/question, "*their attitude towards borders*" (participant F.). This aspect emerged abruptly when the participants were invited to decide between the following options: "Borders kill. Should we abolish *our* borders?" or "Borders kill. Should we abolish borders?". In this case, the collective reflection was so intense that the participants remained in the meeting room to discuss till after midnight, until a further (third) meeting was organized for the following week. Why a simple "our" was so important for them, at the point that they agreed to meet a final time before launching the project? How such a short term could change the meaning of the question? The answer clearly shows the complex nature of the concept of the border. The participants who supported the inclusion of "our" in the question argued the necessity to explicit the psychological dimension linked to the experiences of individuals and their personal barriers. They claimed, therefore, a form of individual responsabilization in eliminating, first of all, personal and psychological borders.

On the contrary, other participants highlighted how the focus on the private dimension of borders could minimize the disruptive effects of geopolitical ones. Moreover, they sustained that "our" implied the identitarian dimension of borders, constructed through the years by modern nation-states to define territories and delimit the geographies of nations. This symbolic dimension works not only on the ground, but also at the imaginary level by shaping national identities of people and their perception of the world (Massey&Jess, 1996). According to this vision, therefore, these are semantic strategies used by politicians and amplified by media to outline contemporary geographies of power, creating the

distinction between “us” and “them”, between who has the right to move and who is depicted as a victim or as an invader without the right to feel part of this “game”. Who says that the borders are “ours”? As a result of a long process of reflection, the decision was to leave “our”, attempting to challenge the traditional rhetoric depicting “us” on the right side of the world. In fact, as a participant underlined “we should also try to overcome the dichotomy between us and them, we should find a phrase to make the person who responds part of the project but avoiding power relationships” (participant G.).

Both in the process of the formulation of the statement/question, and in its communicative power, Referendum entailed alternative imageries on migration and borders, challenging mainstream linkages between political discourse, mediatic representations and moral imaginaries. The statement and the question unveiled specific narratives behind which hides a hierarchical gaze that legitimizes disparities in mobility for different people (Musarò & Moralli, 2019), normalizing borders as natural facts. As the analysis disclosed, Referendum contributed to challenge an imaginary composed of fixed borders and the paradoxical spectacle of the rescue and incursion, in a private space of reflection, critical interpretation and, consequently, in individual and collective responsabilization. A performance that supported the public visibility of borders and their effects, their psychological, symbolic and physical dimensions... In other words, an act of de-bordering of imaginaries around borders.

4.2 Debordering Resistance

Moving from the premise of Referendum as a critical space of symbolic and communicative de-bordering, this second level of analysis focuses on arts as a form of resistance and, potentially, deliberative political participation. A form of “participatory aesthetics” (Dezeuze, 2012), where taking part in artistic work can foster awareness about actual social issues, linking the political, civic and artistic sphere.

This particular characteristic of Referendum has partially been exposed in the previous section (e.g.: underlying that the statement/question was identified after a long process of open debates) but can be unveiled by many other aspects emerged during the action-research.

First of all, during the 10 days of voting, four further public debates were organized in order to discuss about the artistic intervention and discuss on the topic of borders. The first debate was organized at Damslab - an experimental interdisciplinary space of the Departments of Arts of University of Bologna - and involved the participation of Tania Bruguera. During this occasion, the artist explained the parallelisms between migration in Europe and in America and the political aim of Referendum. In her words:

The objective of the Referendum is to bring issues concerning migration to the public, to bring out thoughts and feelings through a direct, face-to-face relationship, using the structure of a democratic legal institution: the vote, which implies taking a position through a gesture. It's a way to ask yourself why it's so difficult to relate to this phenomenon [...] The statement expresses a strong opinion: 'borders kill', which forces to make some reflections right away. The same question was asked in different contexts, despite differences. I am very happy with the process that you are developing in Bologna, it is essential to identify the right question to be asked now in Italy(T.B.).

The second debate concerned the presentation of the project "Mediterranea – Saving Humans", a Non-Governmental Action promoted by civil society to monitor and denounce what is happening in the Mediterranean Sea after NGOs have been criminalized for their rescue role¹⁷. Finally, the last two debates focussed on the recent Decree-Law on Immigration and Security and the gradual criminalization of NGOs – a process gradually started in 2016 (Fekete, 2018).

Secondly, the public debates as well as the voting stations, have tried to involve not only the central areas of the city but also the peripheries.¹⁸ From the circles for the elderly to the tourist bubbles of the two Towers and Piazza Maggiore, from social centres to the academies, theatres and intercultural centres... The acts of de-bordering did not only concern urban symbolic borders but also the physical ones, involving the elderly, students, tourists, migrants, in the centre as well as in the suburbs. A political engagement intention that tried to involve different opinions,

¹⁷<https://mediterranearescue.org/en/>, last access 27/08/2019.

¹⁸ For a list of the spaces involved in the project, both in terms of places where the open discussions took place, and of voting stations, please visit: <http://bologna.emiliaromagna.teatro.com/spettacolo/tania-bruguera-referendum-2/>.

perspectives, insights, asking the question in different languages, in different urban contexts and multiple situations. This has contributed to create alternative spaces of political participation, in opposition to the "confined" forms of citizenships, constantly filtered from above - since institutions establish the political agenda and define the spaces, times and communication methods of participation. During the ten days, urban bulletin boards, radio interventions, leafleting boards, workstations in theatres, etc. literally invaded the city of Bologna. Moreover, thanks to the collaboration with Cheap, site-specific posters were affixed in the Cheap on Board noticeboard circuit.¹⁹ All these interventions were aimed at transforming the public space into a space of discussion, participation, re-appropriation (Lefebvre, 1968).

Thirdly, the training of the volunteers - mainly high-school and bachelor students - who oversaw the voting stations helped to argue artistic choices and promote an open dialogue on the topic of borders in everyday life with passers-by.²⁰ The training itself represented an occasion for talking about borders. This aspect was fundamental for the political core of the artistic intervention - as an active part of the action-research - for two main reasons. On the one hand, it sustained the de-construction of academic and scientific discourses about borders to find new communicative and accessible ways to explain geopolitical and symbolic assets characterizing international migration in Europe nowadays. In other words, during this phase, researchers, artists and volunteers discussed on the complexity and the multidimensionality of the concept of "border", trying to avoid stigmatizing mainstream communicative mechanisms. On the other hand, these communicative mechanisms have been adopted in the voting

¹⁹ The CHEAP on BOARD project is a collaboration between CHEAP, a Street Poster Art Festival, and the City of Bologna, with the aim to display unconventional street poster art and communication projects on the city government's unused notice boards, several hundred boards scattered around downtown Bologna, <http://www.cheapfestival.it/en/on-board/cheap-onboard/>, last access on 20/08/2019.

²⁰ Before the performance (February 2019), two different training meetings were organized both for the university and the high school students who were doing their internship within the project. In particular, the training concerned a critical and historical analysis on borders, past and actual geopolitical settings, the evolution of the right to move and European policies on migration.

stations, transforming the public space into an open space of interaction, reflection and dialogue on borders.

"After the debate to formulate the question, the second operative part was to bring the question to the whole city, to make its inhabitants take a stand. We had real voting stations where people could vote. Voting stations with people who were ready to dialogue with the public and to reflect on the question"(organizer A.)

Indeed, a space where to experiment and promote new citizenships, in plural, just as Mouffe (2007) suggests when she speaks about artistic practices as capable of subverting the dominant hegemony through an "agonistic approach". An approach which considers the differences instead of evening them out, a space of alternative political participation, a space of resistance in the urban space.

5. Beyond the spectacle of the border

In this article we proposed to focus on the symbolic dimension of borders, as they have the power to define territories and delimit the geographies of nations, not only in a physical sense, but also at the level of social imaginaries. In fact, borders can be intended not (only) as places, rather as socially constructed processes (Vaughan-Williams, 2015), producing norms of difference and exclusion. Drawing upon a reflection on the double nature of borders, the second part of the article focusses on the project Referendum, organised within the international festival of the project 'Atlas of Transitions. New geographies for a cross-cultural Europe'. Intended both as a performance and as a form of political activism, this project represented a symbolic and political space of reflection about borders and their complex nature.

Focusing on art as an important space to enhance alternative social imaginaries, forms of political participation and resistance (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007), the paper explored Referendum as a form of symbolic and physical de-bordering. This double role was underlined by the artist but put into practice by the creative capacity (Moralli, 2019) of the multitude of social actors who participated in the process of identification of the statement/question, in the public debates, in the streets at the voting

stations, in the dialogues with the artist, in the notice boards and in the training of the volunteers. Hence, Referendum became a space where hegemonic representations were challenged through the creation of open spaces of collective reflection and creativity. An intention expressed also in the description of the performance:

In our time, a set of global processes has put this consolidated representation of the border in tension, transforming borders into places of intense and often lethal conflict. Mobility control is at the heart of these conflicts, in which other definitions of the border, such as race, gender, social, cultural, linguistic, etc., become central again. While the drive to cross borders is clearly driven by a search for freedom and a claim to equality, its containment or denial aims to reproduce an unequal distribution of freedom of movement and end up in reaffirming the original link between borders and violence. Violence that kills.²¹

Starting from a critic towards the forms of representation of borders as natural and fixed elements, this innovative artistic intervention not only sustained the double conceptualization of border as - symbolic and physical - social construction, but also became a space of resistance, activism and creative intervention in the public space. Thus, the experiential and relational nature of Referendum expressed the power of arts as social and political tools capable of shaping new social imaginaries and new forms of political participation.

In other words, Referendum can be considered as an “active sub-politics” (Holzer & Sørensen, 2003), meaning a solution to the lack of accountability that characterizes traditional political organizations and the assumption of responsibility on the part of citizens in their daily life, going beyond both the public and private sphere. In this perspective, Referendum has opened up new forms of individual and collective responsibilities, thanks to its ability to challenge (at least in part) the imaginary on borders: between symbolic and physical borders, between the centre and the periphery, between artistic and political intervention, between watching, reflecting and acting. In such a perspective, performing arts can provide innovative ways to represent migration, deconstructing conventional narratives and contrasting the post-humanitarian attitude of the “ironic

²¹<http://bologna.emiliaromagnateatro.com/spettacolo/tania-bruguera-referendum-2/>, last access on 16/08/2019.

spectator" (Chouliaraki, 2012). It also represents a space for inclusion, recognition and citizenship (Isin & Nielsen, 2013).

In this context, arts can have a "deconstructing potentiality", promoting a re-signifying process to propose alternative narratives on migration. Moreover, this capacity of Referendum in intervening not only at the level of practices, in central as in peripheral urban spaces, but also at the level of social imaginaries, partially solved the limit of temporariness of the project itself. Indeed, even if the project had a limited duration, by challenging the dynamics of visibility/invisibility and resisting the status quo of mainstream political discourses, it displayed the politicised dimension of migration, becoming an alternative form of political participation in the shape of an "aesthetics of subversion" (Mazzara, 2019, p.10).

To conclude, a question remains: Will it be possible to abolish borders? 2030 voters replied yes, while 489 people voted against it.²² It is difficult to answer this question, but we agree with Mezzadra (2018, p. 6), who suggests that "a border policy can aim to abolish some of them, to transform others from barriers to bridges, and more generally to make space around them for freedom of movement, meeting and multiple crossings"²³.

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²²We expressly reported the result of the performance in the last part of the article because we preferred the analysis to be focused on the process and not on the outcome.

²³Translated by the authors.

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