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When cultural workers become an urban social movement: political subjectification and alternative cultural production in the Macao movement, Milan

Chiara Valli

Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University, Uppsala 75120, Sweden;
e-mail: Chiara.valli@kultgeog.uu.se

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Abstract. This paper explores the relationship between cultural production and insurgent political activity. The specific context for the study is the urban cultural movement of Macao, in Milan. Macao is an urban social movement that aims to challenge neoliberal cultural production and neoliberal urban politics through alternative cultural production models. The overarching argument is that Macao pursues its subjectification process through aesthetic tactics: the process of the formation of a political subject passes through arts and creative expressions to impact and reconfigure the sensible domain. This collective subject is created by: first, reappropriating urban spaces; second, enacting alternative practices of cultural production; and third, guerrilla branding tactics. Ultimately, the paper explores the potential of alliances between urban struggles and struggles over commodification and exploitation of culture.

Keywords: *urban social movement, cultural production, subjectification, activism, aesthetics*

1 Introduction: cultural workers and urban social movements

In this paper I aim to explore the ways in which cultural production and radical political action can intertwine and together provide a critique of and an alternative to the status quo. The engagement of intellectuals, artists, and cultural workers in urban social movements is nothing new. Nevertheless, in recent years the mobilisation of these actors has been triggered mainly around two distinct yet connected themes which are directly linked to the role of cultural production in the contemporary political and economic situation: (1) precarious labour conditions; and (2) the instrumentalization of culture by capital in urban policies. In the post-Fordist economy, cultural workers—variously referred to as ‘knowledge’, ‘cognitive’, ‘immaterial’, ‘affective’, and ‘aesthetic’ labour—have been seen as exemplifying the experience of the transformed working conditions of the new ‘precariat’. Accordingly, different bodies of scholars have put cultural workers at the centre of their theoretical and empirical inquiries (for an overview, see Gill and Pratt, 2008). Recent sociological and geographical literature on cultural labour, for instance, has provided ethnographic accounts of the precarious nature of the labour and life conditions of artists, actors, media workers, musicians, and fashion designers. These studies have consistently highlighted recurrent features of creative and cultural work—flexibility, fragmented employment, informality, self-entrepreneurship, insecurity, high mobility levels, and blended working and private times—in a continuous negotiation of self-exploitation and self-realization (Bain and McLean, 2013; Banks 2007; Christopherson, 2008; Ettlinger, 2007; Jakobs, 2009; McRobbie, 1998; forthcoming; Ross, 2008). At a more philosophical level, autonomous Marxist theorists, including Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Maurizio Lazzarato, Paolo Virno, and Franco Berardi, have developed theoretical accounts of capitalism, highlighting the role of contemporary cognitive labour, its subjectivities, and its political potential to reimagine life and work. In talking of ‘cognitive

capitalism' and 'immaterial labour', Negri signals the co-optation of life into capital in postindustrial society and the deterritorialization of capitalist production from the factory to the times/spaces of society as a whole: 'the whole society is placed at the disposal of profit' (Negri, 1989, page 79). Hence, in the 'firm without factories' (Negri, 1989) and through the 'mass intellectuality' developed from the 1970s (Lazzarato, 1996), anticapitalist struggles have become decentralized away from the factory and any city space has become a possible site of resistance. Moreover, "The unification of the political, the economic, and the social has been produced through communication. It is within this mental and lived unity that revolutionary processes can today be conceived and entailed" (Negri, 2012, page 64, author translation). Hence, even if the rise of immaterial labour and its implication of communicative and emotional capacities raises the possibility of new forms of exploitation, it also offers potential for social transformation if workers are able to put these communicative capacities to work in political projects (Lazzarato, 1996).

Thus, significant theoretical efforts have been made to elaborate on the affirmative potential of cultural labour and its communicative power in resisting capitalism and triggering change. However, these theoretical points have rarely been explicitly explored in empirical work. The present paper addresses this gap. My purpose here is not to provide another account of precariousness in cultural work: rather, this working condition is the background and action trigger both for this paper and for the particular mobilization of cultural workers I examine. Specifically, the paper explores the aesthetic and communicative tactics/strategies used by cultural workers in struggles around labour and the neoliberal city, and the question of how these act on the political.

Furthermore, with this paper I wish to contribute to the literature on urban social movements, in the light of the growing participation of cultural workers in social struggles. Urban social movements in the 1960s–1970s were typically politicized within the context of leftist, student-based, and pacifist mobilizations; they operated within the Keynesian city context and had the traditional factory as their birthplace and target (Castells, 1983). But the interlinked phenomena of globalization, industrial restructuring, the changing role of local governments, and transformed labour conditions have radically transformed social movements' demographic composition, organizational models, and guiding values (Fainstein and Fainstein, 1985; Marcuse, 2009; Mayer, 2011; Nicholls, 2008). Today's movements represent a fragmented landscape and show new types of alliance between socially different groups that feel threatened—materially and/or ideologically—by the dismantling of welfare states and the prioritization of urban growth politics. Research has shown that, more often than in the past, contemporary mobilizations in the Global North succeed in bringing together marginalized groups and comparatively privileged ones. Coalitions of artists and creative professionals with leftists and alternative movements, community-based groups, and minorities have become more and more common, often originating in a shared sense of precariousness (Mayer, 2011). Anti-precarity activism—one of the best known examples being the May Day parades which started in Milan in 2001 and subsequently spread all over Europe—has often entailed cultural, artistic, and visual expressions, such as culture jamming or *detournement* (De Sario, 2007; Raunig, 2004). The experience of antiprecarity activism and its aesthetic expression represent another important context and background for the mobilization of cultural workers discussed in the present paper, since the use of artistic visual tactics to raise consciousness around social issues is here pushed to its extreme. As stated earlier, the second phenomenon that has triggered mobilizations of cultural workers in recent years is the commodification of culture by capital and its instrumentalization for promoting neoliberal urban policies. Novy and Colomb (2012), for example, illustrate the recent mobilization of cultural producers in contemporary 'culture-led' processes of

urbanization in Berlin and Hamburg. Already a decade ago, Harvey (2001) had emphasized the political and subversive potential of cultural producers, hypothesizing that the deepening of the instrumentalization of culture and art for profit reasons and territorial marketing could “lead a segment of the community concerned with cultural matters to side with a politics opposed to multinational capitalism and in favor of some more compelling alternative based on different kinds of social and ecological relations” (page 410). In the processes of commodification of culture and exploitation of cultural capital, Harvey glimpsed the opening of rays of hope from within the contradictions associated with the appropriation of cultural expressions by capitalist forces. Again, this particular aspect of contemporary mobilizations has scarcely been addressed in empirical research.

The interconnections between culture, economy, and urban development are particularly thick in Milan, the location of the case study described in this paper. Milan has traditionally been the productive engine of Italy, and is famous for being an international centre for the fashion, design, and media industries. For decades, cultural industries have used, appropriated, and directed Milanese urban space for branding purposes (Jansson and Power, 2010) and profit making. Moreover, neoliberal policies and austerity measures have substantially reduced public funding for the arts and culture sectors and favoured market-oriented initiatives (eg, ‘*Salone del mobile*’ events). Ongoing urban developments and the incipient tensions in cultural production, consumption, and corporate image building have triggered the mobilisation of citizens as well as artists and cultural producers. The vicissitudes of the Porta Nuova development are emblematic (Brizioli et al, 2013). Under the pretext of launching a ‘fashion city’, in the early 2000s the municipality launched a massive redevelopment plan (Porta Nuova) that would transform the area into offices and luxury residencies. The project immediately elicited strong reactions from local citizen associations and artists living and working in the areas involved in the plan. For more than a decade artists and residents have struggled against top-down gentrification in the area. In particular, the fight against the demolition of the Stecca degli artigiani building—a grassroots arts and social centre—has gained sympathy from local residents as well as from international characters in the arts world. Indeed, many of the cultural workers who began the movement discussed in this paper come from the activist experience of these antigentrification struggles. Furthermore, the reappropriation of arts and culture for not-for-profit reasons, and the recognition of rights for cultural workers, are at the centre of a recent national debate. Since 2011 a series of ‘cultural occupations’, which have at their core a conception of culture as commons began to arise in Italy. The groups involved are constituted of cognitive workers and target abandoned spaces of culture, such as theatres and cinemas. They claim the right to engage with culture through practices of liberation and self-governance of urban spaces dismissed by the private or (formal) public sectors. Amongst the best known are: Teatro Valle Occupato (Rome), Macao (Milan), S.a.L.E Docks (Venice), and Asilo della Creatività e della Conoscenza (Naples). The network of people involved in these mobilizations encompasses the arts, theatre, media, cinema, music workers, as well as academics, jurists, and intellectuals. Debates about precarity, the commons, and the co-optation of arts into capital are often inspired by the operatists and autonomous Marxist theorists mentioned above. The present paper draws on the empirical study of one of these cultural occupations: the Macao movement in Milan. Macao is seen here as a contemporary form of urban social movement that seeks to challenge neoliberal cultural industry and neoliberal urban politics through alternative cultural production models. In this context, conflicts about cultural labour intertwine with critiques of the commodification of culture and urban neoliberal management and aim to challenge hegemonic ideas of society—economically, politically, and culturally. At the same time, we should recognize that the social composition of such social movements is typically now not the one of traditional mobilizations: the people within Macao

are not all materially ‘marginalized’—certainly not those who devised the movement and who, up to a certain point, have constituted its leadership (LDA, as explained later). These people are generally highly educated and have specialized professional skills. The movement originated as a sectorial organization of artists and knowledge workers and its participants do not use the rhetorics typical of social movements calling for a more ‘democratic, sustainable, just’ society. Instead, they talk about challenging ‘financialization, biocapitalism, precariat’.⁽¹⁾ Often, they talk about ‘inclusivity’ using an exclusive language that could actually sound intimidating to less educated or disadvantaged groups. They treat questions of radical democracy not by trying to change society as a whole but, rather, by looking at themselves, by creating an oasis in which to experiment with cultural coproduction. They wish for other groups to create similar experiences in a rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) fashion: oases connected through a relational network. This model tends to bypass the majority of the population, especially those who do not possess the same skills or privileges. This is another reason why we should look more closely at such phenomena and investigate to what extent and in which distinctive ways they can contribute to the ‘right to the city’ debate. The present paper thus takes on this task, examining the resources, aesthetic tactics, and inaugurative practices enacted in Milanese urban space by artists and cultural workers, and showing how these tactics and practices politically impact the sensible domain: reconfiguring the boundaries of the visible, doable, and thinkable, I argue, they challenge power relations. I address this core argument in section 5. First, however, I outline the paper’s theoretical moorings (section 2); the method (section 3); and Macao’s chronology and main facts (section 4).

2 Political subjectification and aesthetics

“Aesthetic experience has a political effect to the extent that the loss of destination that it presupposes disturbs the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations. What it produces is ... a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world where they live and the way in which they are ‘equipped’ for fitting it. It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible. As such, it allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation” (Rancière 2008, page 13).

In the theoretical substance of this paper I draw on conceptualizations of political subjectification and aesthetics. In particular, I appeal in the main body of the paper to political thinkers who ground their understandings of the political in notions of openings and plurality, such as Mouffe (2005) and Arendt (1958; 1998). At the present juncture, referring to the related work of Rancière and Foucault, it is important by way of a wider framing to contextualize my broader understanding of ideas of ‘power’, ‘subjectification’, and ‘subject’. According to Foucault (1983), power applies itself to the individual’s everyday life, making individuals ‘subjects’, by categorizing them, affecting their individuality and identities. Foucault suggests that resistance consists of rejecting the kind of individuality promoted and imposed by the state, and advancing new forms of subjectivity. It is not only a matter of liberating the individual from state institutions, but also involves a deeper liberation from the *type* of individualization linked to the state (Foucault, 1983).

Similar to the Foucauldian idea of a state that makes individuals subjects, Rancière (2005) identifies the ‘*police*’ as the set of actions of politicians, bureaucrats, institutions, and courts that establish ‘the partition of the sensible’. The police institute material and symbolic regimes of the sensible: what should and should not be visible, sayable, thinkable,

audible, and so forth. The partition of space, time, and of the sensible domain is the strategy used by the police for establishing hierarchical orders, by separating visible and invisible, possible and impossible, sane and insane, appropriate and not tolerable. The police, hence, institute orders of time, place, and hierarchies, which legitimize and institutionalize forms of domination and the creation of inequalities. 'Politics'—as opposed to 'the police'—is the reimagination and reconfiguration of such orders; it is a challenge to the domination and symbolizations imposed by the police, and asserts the equality of those marginalized by order of the police (Rancière, 2005). Within the ordered places of the police, politics creates polemical spaces for opposition and resistance (Dikeç, 2012).

Through his theorization of politics, Rancière emphasizes 'dissensus' and 'disagreement': "Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's function. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise" (Rancière, 1999, page 30 cited in Dikeç, 2012, page 674). Hence, politics opens up spaces of insurgency that disrupt and challenge the order of things and seek equality.

New forms of subjectivity can be formed through collective action, by what Rancière calls 'subjectification': that is, "the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience" (Rancière, 1999, page 35, in May, 2010, page 12). What politics and aesthetics have in common, hence, is the ability to redraw borders and relations and, hence, to create new subjectivities. 'Aesthetic experience' can be understood on two levels. The first level is in a sense close to the Kantian idea of 'a priori forms of sensibility'. For instance, in *The nights of Labor*, Rancière (1989) presents the worker's movement in France as an 'aesthetic movement', because it was an attempt to reconfigure the partitions of time and space that framed labour, power, and social relations. A second level of understanding sees aesthetics as a particular mode of artistic knowledge, expression, style, and taste. In this paper, the term 'aesthetic experience' refers to both of these levels of interpretation. In fact, the study case is an urban social movement promoted by artists and cultural producers, which combines political struggles with the specific aesthetic competences belonging to these activists. I will explore how these activists use their professional aesthetic skills to impact and reconfigure the sensible domain—that is, everything that can be perceived through a sensory experience—and, hence, to what extent they can challenge power structures using this very aesthetic expertise.

3 Methodology

Empirically, the paper draws on qualitative research on the cultural and political movement of Macao, born in Milan, Italy, in 2012. I conducted ethnographic participant observation during the summer of 2012 and the spring of 2013, when I resided in building occupied by the activists and participated in their activities for about two months in total. In addition to participant observation, I conducted twenty-two in-depth interviews with activists, and collected textual and visual background information from blogs, websites, and social media. During my first exploratory fieldwork, I took part in manual works for the restoration of the building. There I was able to socialize informally with the activists, get a feeling of how they organize and relate to each other. I also conducted five pilot semistructured interviews. During this first phase I realized that the motivations, levels of education, personalities, and professions of these activists were extremely varied and that they attributed different weights and values to the various dimensions of the experience they were sharing. When I returned for a longer residency, I adopted a different approach. Instead of asking direct questions, I prepared twenty cards with recurring 'binomes' from the pilot interviews and

media communications of the group (eg, arts/politics, open/close, arts/city). The interviewees were left free to organize a conversation drawing on those couplets of words in the order and to the extent they preferred. I intervened with follow-up questions. This method provided me with understandings of the discursive patterns of the interviewees, and how they evaluated various aspects of the same experience, beyond the official thoughts and rhetorics driving the movement. Moreover, through participant observation I had the opportunity to directly observe how these thoughts were actually enacted in the everyday practices of the group. Due to lack of space, I will leave the analysis of the power structures within the group for another occasion. Here I focus instead on the impact of this group as a whole on the public realm.

4 Macao: chronology and main facts

4.1 1st phase: 'Laboratori dell'Arte'

The set of people, thoughts, and deeds that would eventually be called 'Macao' originated from a group of artists, art critics, curators, historians, writers, and activists and was born in the summer of 2011 in Milan and called *Lavoratori dell'Arte* (LDA—'Art Workers'). LDA was originally organized around issues of precarity and exploitation of arts for profit. From January 2012 LDA started to plan what would later be called 'Macao'. They announced the upcoming opening of a 'new arts center of Milan', with the provisional name 'Macao'. The name itself, Macao, was conceived as a mockery of contemporary museum acronyms, such as MoMA, MAXXI, MAMbo, MACRO and the like.⁽²⁾ Through an online campaign and an itinerant video-box installation, 'Macao Point', LDA invited citizens of Milan to express how they would imagine a 'new arts centre'.

4.2 2nd phase: Torre Galfa

Beyond this prenatal campaign, one could say that Macao was officially born on 5 May 2012, with the occupation of Galfa tower. Galfa tower is a thirty-one-floor building located close to Milan Central Station, emblematically positioned between Pirelli Tower—headquarters of the regional government—and the newly built Lombardy Palace, in a zone (Isola) that has recently undergone substantial gentrification. The skyscraper has been in a state of abandonment since 1996 and is the property of Salvatore Ligresti, an entrepreneur whose real estate activities have profoundly transformed Milan since the 1960s. His financial holding is currently undergoing bankruptcy proceedings and he and part of his family were arrested in July 2013 for financial fraud. LDA entered the tower on 5 May and lit it up with blue lights. A vertical banner was displayed with the text: "We could even think about flying ...".⁽³⁾

The astonishing sight of a 109 m high, blue-lit, skyscraper which had been abandoned for the previous fifteen years immediately attracted the attention of media and thousands of people. For ten days the tower was animated with people and activities: concerts, artistic performances, gardening, public readings, lectures, and public assemblies.

On 15 May police forces evacuated the building. As a gesture of solidarity, thousands of people gathered in the space in front of Galfa tower, continuing meetings and activities, claiming that "Macao was not simply a space" and therefore could not be stopped by the clearance of a building (figure 1). On the same day the city Mayor, Giuliano Pisapia, intervened in the assembly and proposed to Macao the possibility of their settling into a newly renovated municipal space for cultural activities. The assembly replied that the issues raised by Macao were not a simple matter of spaces but, rather, questions about "working conditions, territorial development policies, the role of cultural production within economic value creation, the illegitimate appropriation of this value and the proposal of new forms of

(2) MoMA—Museum of Modern Art, New York; MAXXI—National Museum of Arts of XXI Century, Rome; MAMbo—Modern Art Museum Bologna; MACRO—Contemporary Art Museum Rome.

(3) "Si potrebbe anche pensare di volare".

Figure 1. [In colour online.] Public assembly in front of Galfa Tower (right corner), Milan, 5 May 2012. Macao Logo in the upper right corner (source: <https://www.facebook.com/macaopagina?fref=photo>, published online 15 May 2012, accessed 5 August 2014).

income redistribution”.⁽⁴⁾ The offer of the mayor was hence declined, although not without creating disagreements among part of the assembly. In a public letter, Macao stated: ““Macao does not aim to be just another Arts centre, rather a *new* Arts centre that reinvents the modalities of production and fruition of art and culture. Thus, we need to question national and local cultural policies, and scatter the management modalities for public and private spaces and resources, in order to establish practices of commoning. The struggle that Macao is pursuing was born and developed around Galfa tower, a physical symbol of rent accumulation and financial speculation, which makes it impossible to discern between private and public power. Inside and around Galfa tower we are experimenting with practices of real democracy”.”⁽⁵⁾

4.3 3rd phase: Palazzo Citterio

The second milestone in the history of Macao was the occupation of Palazzo Citterio, which started on 19 May and lasted for just a couple of days. Palazzo Citterio is a historical building dating from the 17th century, acquired by the state in 1972 as a future space for cultural and artistic facilities connected to the Brera Fine Arts Academy and left almost unused since. The building is part of a masterplan called Grande Brera that aims to reorganize the spaces of Brera Arts Academy and its prestigious gallery through what is currently the largest national infrastructural project for arts and culture. The restoration works have been postponed for forty years, due to logistic problems, lack of funding, and corruption issues.⁽⁶⁾ This location was chosen by Macao with the aim to emphasize the inefficient management of public funds and the corrupt dynamics that are often behind this in Italy. On 22 May, when the

(4) <http://www.macao.mi.it/>

(5) Public letter from Macao, 15 May 2012; see <http://www.macao.mi.it>

(6) In 2010, the coordinator for the works at Grande Brera was arrested for corruption.

police and army arrived, Macao activists had already left Palazzo Citterio and were waiting just outside it. In the internal courtyard, they left a circle of empty chairs with the banner: “Your politics create emptiness.”

4.4 4th phase: urban drifting and the Via Molise slaughterhouse market

This second eviction (from Palazzo Citterio) marked the opening of a new phase for Macao in which activists and citizens were meeting in small gatherings in the city in an ‘urban drifting’ fashion. This phase was characterized not only by a different spatial strategy, but also by a shift in the decision-making modes and in power relations among Macao activists. Whilst the occupations of Galfa tower and Palazzo Citterio had been carefully planned by the pivotal LDA group, after the rapid eviction from the Palazzo Citterio the de facto leadership of LDA members started to become diluted in favour of a more horizontal decision-making model. Whereas the first two occupations had been chosen according primarily to symbolic and political criteria, the enlarged composition of the movement introduced novel parameters and more pragmatic circumstances for the selection of the next building to occupy. The possibility of settling down, staying put (for a while) and therefore having the time and space for enacting activities on a stable basis were significant factors in the decisions and they changed the reasons for the occupation—from a spectacular provocation to a more stable base for cultural proposals. The new choice was an ex-slaughterhouse market at 68 Molise Street, where Macao is still located. The ex-slaughterhouse market is a Liberty building from the beginning of the 20th century, owned by a public-private water services company, and had been lying in a state of abandonment and blight since the 1980s. The activists of Macao immediately started work to put the building back in order and make it secure. Since then, they have been organizing activities including alternative and cutting-edge cultural productions. Perhaps the most significant cultural activity was a movie called *OPEN*, in which every step of the movie making was enacted collectively: direction, writing, acting, technical matters, editing.

In November 2012 the Macao activists conducted an internal survey of their professions, housing, and economic conditions. The data collected from a sample of seventy-five individuals depict a group of people with a relatively balanced gender distribution, mostly in their late twenties and thirties, 75% of whom hold a university degree or higher. The group is economically heterogeneous, with 13% of interviewees earning less than €500 per month, but also 18% earning more than €2000 monthly. All in all the group appears to be composed of highly educated people of both sexes with a variety of incomes and professional situations, the majority of which are characterized as temporary, precarious, or freelance working contracts. The internal survey does not contain any further information about ethnic origin or social economic background; however, the activists I spoke with came predominantly from Italian middle-class families. Many of them hold a university degree, often in the fields of arts, design, architecture, or videography. Only a small minority has ever participated in traditional political militancy, although quite a few, particularly those who were members of LDA, have taken part in antigentrification campaigns in Milan or elsewhere in Italy.

5 Political subjectification of Macao through aesthetics

In this section I will explore the subjectification of Macao at the crossroads of political struggle and alternative cultural production. My overarching purpose in this section is to understand the process of subjectification of Macao: that is, how a group of cultural workers has become a political subject. My suggestion is that it has done so by enacting tactics of appearance in physical and virtual public space, which were characterized by inaugurative practices and therefore were able to reconfigure the sensible domain.

5.1 Appearance in symbolic and material space through symbolic acts

According to Arendt (1998), space provides the possibility for political relations and at the same time for expressions of the uniqueness of each individual, so that “space relates and separates” people (Dikeç, 2012, page 671). By mobilizing and self-organizing around certain issues, grassroots movements ‘appear’ in the public realm in an Arendtian sense, making themselves visible and heard, and sharing their capacity for political action. Arendt defines the political domain as a ‘space of appearance’. When individuals ‘appear’ to each other and act in the presence of each other, they can set up political relations: a space of appearance is always a potential space for political action. Political action is conceptualized by Arendt as a collective action of people coming together in the public realm and ‘acting together’. This does not mean that individuals act together by achieving a consensus; in fact, plurality implies a political relation, a confrontation of unique and distinct individuals who act, talk, and build relations in the public realm. The space of appearance is hence a space of encounter and rupture, a potential for new beginnings (Dikeç, 2012).

If we consider social mobilizations as crystallized political action, we can say that social mobilizations open an inaugural political identity, a space of rupture through their appearance in space. My interviewees acknowledged the importance of appearing in the public sphere in various ways, in particular in relation to the occupation of Galfa tower. One of them, a member of LDA, architect, and artist, explained:

“Our objective was not just to occupy a city space, but rather to occupy a *mental space*, a *space of public debate*, in order to bring a debate to public attention. This debate was initially sectorial, connected to visual arts and we wanted to expose it to the public consideration by reappropriating an ‘utopia’. So from the beginning we wanted to find an utopic space, that entailed a different imaginary, to enter the public scene. This is how the occupation of Galfa tower originated” (emphasis added).

This interviewee talked about “entering the public scene”, “the public debate” and he stated that their way of making themselves visible and heard in this domain was a spectacular occupation that entailed ideas of “utopia” and “different imaginary”. A physical urban space was appropriated as a strategy to appear in the political debate and to occupy a space in people’s consciousness.

Another interviewee, an urban planner, who approached Macao during the occupation of Galfa tower, confirmed the forcefulness of this appearance:

“This mobilization has made some questions visible. That building was not invisible... But the occupation activated people’s sensibilities in a new way.”

In addition, the idea of appearing for the first time in that very skyscraper was strategic on different symbolic levels. Firstly, it highlighted the presence of the building itself, centrally located, and yet abandoned for fifteen years. The particular history of the building, linked to financial speculation and real estate profit, was brought back to public notice. Secondly, the idea of storming a skyscraper, an architectural symbol of the tertiary economic boom of the 1950s and the following recession, represented a direct challenge to the hegemonic modalities of running the city. Thirdly, the act of entering an abandoned building aimed to awaken citizens and encourage them to reappropriate city spaces, as expressed by this interviewee, a documentary maker, whose interest in Macao was sparked during the Galfa tower occupation:

“Macao through its actions has made some possibilities more visible. Occupying empty spaces, injecting them with life, has made Milan citizens aware that there is a number of abandoned spaces that could accommodate unexpressed needs.”

Furthermore, the occupation of a physical space such as Galfa tower, with an architectural typology different from the spaces typically occupied by protesters or squatters (squares, abandoned warehouses, etc), has empowered the citizens by inaugurating a space of possibility

in the collective imaginary, a space of citizenship activation and agency beyond the common imagination. As spelled out by the aforementioned interviewee:

“The power expressed by Macao in that situation consisted in making people able to do things. In that space everybody had the possibility to articulate their ideas; there was an actual space where people could modify reality! It has made people aware of the possibility to change reality.”

In conclusion, the appearance of Macao in the public sphere—and, in particular, in the kind of urban space represented by Galfa tower—has had political relevance, for: it has allowed the encounter of ‘human plurality’ (Arendt, 1998); exposed alternative values and enriched the heterogeneity of voices in the urban arena; it has brought some new questions into the public debate and raised awareness on issues concerning cultural production, urban dynamics, and public and private real estate; it has inaugurated a space for ‘shared capacity of action’, be it actual or potential, and stimulated new beginnings.

5.2 Rejection of given identities and creation of a new subject

The appearance of Macao in the public domain is thus a political act in itself. Yet, Macao is not just a set of appearances or actions: it constitutes a subject that is a locus of agency. By rejecting, at least ideologically, the identity and the set of values associated with neoliberal cultural and political systems, LDA and Macao have acted politically by creating an unedited collective subject. The process of subjectification has unrolled through: first, the rejection of given identities and subjectivities; and, second, the constitution of an unedited identity. Yet, the identity of the new subject Macao is not given or predetermined but, rather, is an ongoing process in which constitutive values are negotiated and embodied in radical democratic practices.

Macao introduces itself not simply as an antagonist movement, but as a proactive voice for the city. This has been reiterated in the official online press releases, and also during many of my interviews. This emerged often when asking about the connections and dissimilarities between Macao and the protests connected to the international Occupy movement. Among other similar comments on this topic, one interviewee stated:

“Macao is not a mobilization in reaction to the financial crisis. It is not contingent, it is broader: it is the enaction of a subject that was already there. A new yet consolidated subject, rather than a subject that had been excluded through the crisis, like in Occupy.”

The “new yet consolidated subject” mentioned by this interviewee—and spelled out more explicitly elsewhere in the interview—is the category of cognitive workers. More precisely in the process at issue, two initially separate subjects were formed: LDA first, and subsequently Macao. The aim of the formation of LDA was exactly to formally acknowledge a professional subject: cognitive workers, who are fundamental for the economy of the country and yet are *not* formally recognized as a professional category. These workers feel stuck in permanent precariousness and feel that their works and lives are co-opted into the exploitative dynamics of a neoliberal cultural market. In a statement by LDA, we read:

“The term ‘contemporary operator’ fully describes and reconstructs our existential, professional, social, cultural and political fragmentation.” (7)

With the introduction of terms such as ‘contemporary operator’, or ‘arts worker’, LDA recognized and subjectified the common condition of all those professionals within the cultural, artistic, and communication sectors, with the aim of exposing and acknowledging these working conditions within public debate. Moreover, in their announcements LDA stated that they did not wish to constitute a form of artistic avant-garde but, rather, to take part in wider political and social struggles with compatible values:

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(7) 25 September 2011, <http://www.undo.net/it/>

“We reject forms of aestheticization and any avant-garde ideas, in art as well as in politics. We therefore intend to blend into the reality of those political struggles which in different but similar terms are related to those of visual arts—eg, entertainment and knowledge workers, and students.”⁽⁸⁾

Accordingly, just after taking over Galfa tower, the pivotal LDA group has blended in with the people they had attracted through the occupation. LDA acted as activators of citizenship around political issues concerning the city as a whole. This explicit rejection of becoming an artistic avant-garde has emerged spontaneously and repeatedly in my conversations with members of the pivotal LDA group:

“Our attitude has always been proactive and inclusive; accordingly, once we entered Galfa tower and we got that powerful response from the city, we decided to dissolve the LDA group into this movement. Even the choice of a different name: ‘Macao’ and not, for instance, ‘Galfa tower occupied by the LDA’, aimed to release this action from an avantgarde group.”

Why LDA, and later Macao, rejected the identity of avant-garde was made clear in an interview with another artist:

“We never wanted to start a dynamic in which the ones who constituted the avant-garde drag the others behind.”

Macao, hence, originated through the aspirations of LDA—and other people who had joined them along the path—to enact a practice of direct participation and radical democracy, in combination with the sectorial demands of the art and cultural workers. At the same time, they aimed to involve other citizens in their struggle while rejecting the role of an avantgarde that elects itself as a leader for the movement. In conclusion, the pivotal subject LDA sprang from a rejection of the logics of exploitation of cognitive labour in the artistic and cultural sector; but by rejecting sectorial struggles (or an avant-garde identity) as well it has raised wider political issues, opened up to the city, and involved a broader range of people and questions. The encounter and coactivation between LDA, other workers in the creative sector, and a heterogeneous critical mass ultimately engendered the new and current subject called Macao.

5.3 Open identity: Macao as a way of doing things

In this subsection I develop the argument that Macao can be interpreted as ‘a way of doing things’—as articulated by an interviewee. The ongoing subjectification process of Macao draws on the enactment of practices rather than on leading theories or positions. In other words, forms of radical democracy and the implementation of ‘the political’ (Mouffe, 2005) are not just methodological features of the subject Macao; rather, they constitute its very ontology.

Subjectification for Macao is found in the practice of radical democracy and the implementation of the political. The use of these concepts—‘radical democracy’ and ‘the political’—are intended here in the manner envisioned by Mouffe. Mouffe, like Arendt and Rancière, contributes to our understanding of the political as a space of rupture and a shaking up of the established order of things (Dikeç, 2012). Mouffe explicitly distinguishes the vital struggle of competing and contrasting values in society from the established set of institutions and practices, by distinguishing between ‘the political’ and ‘politics’ (1995; 2005):

“by the *political* I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by *politics* I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political” (Mouffe, 2005, page 9, original emphases).

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⁽⁸⁾ 25 September 2011, <http://www.undo.net/it/>

For Mouffe, the goal of radical democracy is to recognize the agonistic dimension of social life and to carve out spaces for it within the political system.

In this sense I claim that a practice of radical democracy is proffered by Macao, both in its internal organization and in relation to the wider political sphere of the city. There is no space here to discuss the internal organization of Macao in depth. Rather, I simply identify the main features that allow us to refer to the internal organization as a practice of radical democracy: the structuration per thematic boards, each of which enjoys equal position and weight, from the most operative to the most theoretical; the rejection of any form of leadership—artistic, political, or moral; the derivation of shared norms and values through a bottom-up approach—that is, deriving them from the practices and not from a priori statements; the method of reaching consensus in the assemblies and the refusal of exclusionary decisionmaking mechanisms; the implementation and experimentation of methods of participation (one of the boards is dedicated specifically to this purpose); and cultural production that is itself organized collectively with experimental practices, an example of which is the collective movie *OPEN*, in which all the people involved were simultaneously directors, actors, and technicians.

The identity of the subject itself is open and in continuous negotiation. As emerged from my interviews and fieldwork observations, Macao's identity is not given but is, rather, in continuous becoming, in a negotiation of meaning and values. One of the original members of LDA, an art curator, recounted how the pivotal LDA group had had to question the identity and composition of Macao from the very beginning:

“When we [LDA] opened Galfa tower, we bet on the fact that Milan had a need. And the response was so rich, wide and powerful, and at the same time so multifaceted, that a series of things that we had previously foreseen for Macao have changed. Hence the first thing we did, and are still doing, was question ourselves about our professions and identities.”

Transversal to the contingent contents of every thematic discussion, there is an unceasing metadiscussion about the democracy and horizontality involved in the decision-making process and a profound questioning of the tools and values involved in the production of contents.

This constant self-questioning and self-interrogation was also clear from my direct observation and was well expressed by one interviewee, an ICT technician and political militant:

“Macao is more of a cultural dimension, a way of doing things, rather than a physical space.”

Every organizational or productive aspect is hence managed in a way that endorses the agonistic dimension of social life. Philosophical interrogation, however, is more likely to raise questions than provide answers or concrete actions. The ambitious ideals of radical democracy often result in endless discussions, and sometimes even quarrels and fights over disparate issues, from practical aspects like cleaning and fundraising, to existential inquiries and philosophical elaborations. This slow and strenuous way of proceeding caused an underlying feeling of frustration among many interviewees, who said that they wish they could act and experiment more directly without passing through lengthy discussions in the assembly. A further cause of frustration is that discussions about urban or artistic issues frequently end up as internal debates about Macao itself. Paradoxically, the main challenge to a movement that proposes openness and inclusivity as central ideals is, arguably, the risk of becoming self-referential and closed in on itself.

5.4 Guerrilla branding and aesthetic tactics of political subjectification

In this subsection I explore the aesthetic tactics used by Macao to convey its messages and enact its political subjectification. Here, I understand ‘aesthetics’ not only as the dimension of sensorial experience but, more specifically, in the acceptance of ‘artistic expression, taste, and style’. I will show that for Macao these aesthetic tactics, which we could think of as a sort of guerrilla-branding tactics, were meant to multiply connections and to stimulate imagination by changing “the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible” (Rancière, 2008, page 13). Ultimately, I argue that the artists, curators, designers, and other professional figures who gave rise to Macao, through their professional skills, have contributed to creating “new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation” in the city (page 13).

Guerrilla marketing (Levinson, 1984) implies an unconventional way of performing lowbudget promotional activities. It consists of small, periodic, and pop-up attacks characterized by creativity and imagination (Tek, 1999). Similarly, guerrilla branding is a strategy of guerrilla marketing aimed at the creation of a recognizable image around a product. We could say that Macao was born first as a brand, and only later materialized in space and time. The term ‘brand’ is not intended here in a marketing or for-profit sense. Instead, brand is envisioned as an evocative metonymy able to recall and produce imaginary, as a produced mental representation of an entity. Imaginary is an established concept for geographers: geographical imaginary is a “taken-for-granted spatial ordering of the world” (Gregory et al, 2011, page 282). It is more than a simple representation of the world: it implies conscious and/or unconscious boundaries, hierarchies, and contrapositions. In the production of spatial imaginaries, language and, in particular, metaphors and visuality, are of crucial importance (Gregory et al, 2011).

The challenge to hegemonic geographical imaginaries of Milan and the production of alternative imaginaries was a recurrent theme in my interviews, and in the publications and debates produced within Macao, with expressions like “we produce alternative imaginary” or “we want to take back the horizons our imaginaries have been deprived of”. This is an example of how the emphasis on communication and affect in creative work directly informed the political tactics of Macao.

The inaugural appearance of Macao in the public sphere has been a gradual process, and it took place through guerrilla branding tactics in parallel in virtual and physical spaces, comprising respectively the online launch of the bid for a new arts centre and the itinerant video installation “Macao Point”, respectively. Both these initiatives aimed at creating a buzz and stimulating imagination around a subject that, before the occupation of Galfa tower, was vaguely defined as ‘Macao, the New Arts Center of Milan’, with no further description or explanation. Indeed, through Macao Point and the web campaign, citizens were invited to imagine how a new arts centre could possibly be, to provide suggestions for acronyms on the word ‘Macao’, and therefore to fill this signifier, this ‘brand’, with meanings.

Yet, such a vague ontological definition was tied instead to an extreme care in graphic presentation. The blue and yellow logo of Macao has marked the itinerant video-box installation, photos, videos, website, and any and all other kinds of materials produced by LDA from the very beginning, even from the pre-Galfa-tower phase. What was not born was already visually recognizable. In this sense, LDA have branded the imaginary around a hypothetical possible arts centre through the name and the logo ‘Macao’ and asked for the participation of citizens in creating this imaginary and making it happen.

Yet, the takeover of Galfa tower and its spectacular blue illumination made Macao visible and materialized in the urban space for the first time as a collective subject. We have seen that the appearance in the public sphere was a political act itself. Yet, *how* this subject appeared is

equally relevant. This occupation was nothing like traditional occupations and squats. In the decades-long tradition of squatting in Milan and other Italian cities, occupations have usually been less spectacular, often in peripheral, shady locations and with the aim, besides making a political point, of responding to some material needs such as housing or space for collective activities. The Galfa tower occupation, instead, was preceded by a public campaign, and was meant to attract as much attention as possible because it was substantially a symbolic demonstration, rather than the search for a place to stay. Additionally, when LDA occupied Galfa tower, they displayed a banner with the evocative message: “We could even think about flying ...” as an invitation to the Milanese population to dream, to detach from individualistic ways of living and thinking, and to create something new. It was an invitation to rethink reality. For these reasons, I argue that the occupation of that skyscraper succeeded in moving the edges of the imaginary a bit further. This achievement has been reached by temporarily appropriating a space and transforming it in an eye-catching way, and by spreading the message of this event through social media.

Arguably, the very nature and professional profiles of most of the activists of Macao—coming from artistic and cultural sectors—are the source of the marked ‘aesthetic efficiency’ of the communication of political and social messages by Macao. In both physical and virtual space, Macao has appropriated, mimicked, and overturned the semiotic codes of commercial communication to convey a political message against these very commercial logics. The combination of semiotic codes belonging to cultural, artistic, and advertising sectors with political and critical messages, and the fact that this was conducted by professionals from these sectors, has created something quite unique in the context of urban social movements. The expertise in creating affect and communication has been the main tool for resistance, as theorized by Lazzarato (1996).

As an art curator from LDA stated in an interview:

“The innovation in the communicative strategy of Macao—which is not actually an innovation but simply coherence with the nature of Macao, is that of using a language that is not normally used by political antagonist movements The language we use is different. For example, we create documents with a juridical value, as well as concerts; social dinners as well as new artistic productions ... all this together creates a language that is not ascribable to that of tout-court political antagonism, nor electoral campaigns, nor labour unionism.”

Aesthetic tactics—that is, tactics that act on the sensible domain—hold a set of unique capabilities typical of the arts and not included in conventional political communication: “Aesthetic efficiency means a paradoxical kind of efficiency that is produced by the very break of any determined link between cause and effect” (Rancière, 2008, page 12): that is, an efficiency that goes beyond fixed logics of consequentiality and that by breaking them is able to open up spaces of possibility. The potential for using artistic languages and applying them to political and urban issues is intrinsic in the types of cultural and artistic professions that gave birth to Macao. These languages can open the door to unexplored connections, challenge perceptions of power relations and hence trigger political debates. Therefore, we can see the value of cultural workers as potential subversive forces.

6 Conclusions

In this paper I have sought to contribute to unpacking our understanding of urban social movements initiated by artists and their subjectification dynamics. The arguments put forward in this paper are fundamentally about the relation between politics and aesthetics, and the interconnections of struggles against the neoliberal city and neoliberal cultural production. Specifically, we have seen that Macao pursues its political subjectification

through aesthetics: the process of the formation of a collective political subject passes in this case through arts and creative expressions to impact and change the sensible world, to reconfigure it. To sustain this overarching point, I have illustrated a set of arguments that can be summarized as follows. Through the occupation and transformation of physical space—and, in particular, meaningful territorial landmarks—this new collective subject is appearing in the public realm and reconfiguring the sensible domain, making itself visible and opening up a political debate on some sectorial, urban, and political issues. The process of subjectification of this group has passed through the following stages. First, the challenge of some values, ways of working, and of living imposed by the current cultural industry system and the critique of some broader urban dynamics. Second, the ongoing constitution of a new identity consists in performing radical democratic practices both in cultural productions and in organizational models. Third, Macao draws on media, social networks, and guerrilla branding tactics to introduce new languages and symbols and to talk about the political. The expertise in enacting aesthetic tactics—or, in other words, the aesthetic efficacy, which has opened up new possibilities of collective enunciation—was peculiar to the composition of this movement, which began as a collective of cultural and artistic workers.

The question as to the success of Macao is a difficult and open one. It is hard, and perhaps not even possible, to talk about success or failure in absolute terms for an experience such as Macao. Actually, it is hard and controversial to talk about this in relation to any social movement that does not state circumscribed goals; think, for instance, of the Occupy movement and the debate around its (non)success (Byrne, 2012; Roberts, 2012; Van Gelder, 2011). Nevertheless, any social movement has to face questions concerning what it has achieved at some point, and to reflect on its impact on changing power relations. If we measure the success of a movement in terms of its capability to materially affect a given social reality (Castells, 1983)—that is, in its capability to influence the material means of production and reproduction of a system—we can say that the success of Macao has, so far, been limited to opening an alternative space for self-organized cultural production, without being able to meaningfully affect the mainstream system; and hence it has substantially failed. However, the aims and the effects of Macao were more subtle and complex. Their aim was twofold: firstly, to raise consciousness about political and economic issues, which has been pursued through what I have articulated as ‘appearance’ and ‘aesthetic tactics’; and secondly, this movement wanted to open a space for alternative ways of making culture—it was not a reflection just about *what* to do, but also about *how* to do culture, manage a collective urban space, take decisions—enact ‘the political’ in Mouffe’s terms. This inaugurative space—space not understood as geographical location, for we have seen that this has already changed a number of times, but as ‘social space’, and thus possibility for encounter and action—has not been created by seeking permissions but, rather by *doing together*. In this sense, the very existence of a space like Macao is an act of empowerment. The crucial question about *who* Macao is actually empowering is an open one: I see the actual openness and inclusivity of this space for the citizenship, and not just for its protagonists, as the biggest challenge for Macao. In conclusion, as advocated by Gibson-Graham, for us as critical thinkers “There could be a greater role in our thinking for invention and playfulness, enchantment and exuberance. And we could start to develop an interest in unpredictability, contingency, experimentation, or even an attachment to the limits of understanding and the possibilities of escape” (2006, pages 6–7). The subversive potential of aesthetic tactics, as we have seen through this paper, is wide. The political relevance of cultural and artistic practices lies in their capacity to act on the sensible domain by promoting inaugurative connections and disconnections. By doing so, artistic practices can reframe, at least temporarily, the relations between bodies, space, and time, and the power structures they entail. And this is the ultimate goal of urban political struggles.

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