



VOLUME 17 ISSUE 1

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The International Journal of

Social, Political, and Community Agendas in the Arts

Shifting Ground

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

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ARTSINSOCIETY.COM

**THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL,
POLITICAL AND COMMUNITY AGENDAS IN THE ARTS**

<https://artsinsociety.com>
ISSN: 2326-9960 (Print)
ISSN: 2327-2104 (Online)
<https://doi.org/10.18848/2326-9960/CGP> (Journal)

First published by Common Ground Research Networks in 2022
University of Illinois Research Park
60 Hazelwood Drive
Champaign, IL 61820 USA
Ph: +1-217-328-0405
<https://cgnetworks.org>

The International Journal of Social, Political and Community Agendas in the Arts is a peer-reviewed, scholarly journal.

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Shifting Ground: Art and Design Action for the Engagement and Empowerment of Migrant Citizens

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Abstract: This paper stems from a community-based art and design project entitled 'Shifting Ground,' which was developed in 2019 and involved newly arrived and second-generation migrants, now living in the city of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Based on participants' cultural heritage, the project addressed the creative process as a vehicle for dialogue and as a means of finding a sense of place in the new culture. The initiative started with a ludic interaction with the migrant citizens, followed by two ceramic sculpture workshops, and ending with an exhibition that brought together the participants and their families as well as some local artists and representatives of public authorities. The research is focused mainly on the methodology used for the development of the co-creation work with the participants, particularly in the notion of action as a way to interact and develop the ceramic sculptures and to promote the participants' social and cultural integration. In this context, the concept of action is analyzed as a central characteristic of the artistic practice and as a political tool for the empowerment of a displaced community. Some theories are taken into account, such as Hannah Arendt's concept of action and Bruno Latour's concept of thing, to deepen the notion of action. The paper begins by providing a brief summary of the immigration process that has occurred in the United States, followed by the presentation of a case study by the refugee Vietnamese American artist Tiffany Chung to contextualize the theme addressed in this research.

Keywords: Community-Based Art, Social Innovation Design, Participation, Migration, Action, Thing

Key Facts on Immigration and Community Art Practice

During 2019, the period in which the *Shifting Ground* project was carried out in the United States, the admission processes of refugees and immigrants were significantly threatened. It should be noted that Donald Trump's administration-imposed restrictions on immigration to the US, namely at the level of limiting legal immigration, such as, for example, legislation that would have changed the country's legal immigration system, radically reducing immigration with family origins (Krogstad and Gonzalez-Barrera 2022).

Regarding the US diversity Visa program, created in 1995 with the aim of diversifying the immigrant population in the US, more than one million immigrants have received green cards. However, Donald Trump tried to end this program during his term in office as well as Temporary Protected Status (Krogstad and Gonzalez-Barrera 2022).

There has also been a sharp decrease in refugee admissions to the US during Donald Trump's administration, particularly during 2019, which reached historic lows. The sharp decrease in refugee acceptance in the US coincided with the movement of the largest number of refugees worldwide since WWII (Krogstad 2019).

This was the context in which the art project *Shifting Ground*, developed by the researchers in 2019 in collaboration with the American artist Jane Gilmore, support of local institutions in Cedar Rapids (Iowa, US), and active participation of immigrants and refugees, took place. However, before focusing on this case study and the main underlying concepts, we present another recent case study, which we consider paradigmatic in this hybrid field between art, activism, and politics.

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Tiffany Chung's Vietnam Exodus Project

The case study in question was awarded as part of the two-year program-cycle (2018–2010) of the *If Art Is Politics, Vera List Center Forum*, which is by the visual artist Tiffany Chung. The Vera List Center Forum is an annual gathering of creatives and thinkers interested in the combination of art and politics, realized and disseminated through a set of actions whose aim is to promote politics of respect, solidarity, and care for the underprivileged. The Vera List Center for Art and Politics was launched in 1992 in direct response to the Culture Wars in the US due to the action of global capitalism that by promoting involuntary mass migration, authoritarian regimes, environmental devastation, racism, and great asymmetries between rich and poor, among others, increasingly weakened cultural institutions. Recently, however, numerous activist movements, often led by artists and other indigenous movements, are contributing to making these cultural institutions more resilient, transforming them into bodies with similar characteristics that share interdisciplinary approaches, resources, and local knowledge. The artistic practice used in the focused case study is guided by the same logic of political engagement, proving that art can have a political and transformative action on sites, practices, and political actors themselves, including cultural institutions (Kuoni and Pira 2019).

The *Vietnam Exodus Project* by Tiffany Chung has an interdisciplinary nature, which, combined with the research methods used by the artist, aims to reflect on the harmful consequences of the Vietnamese exodus and contribute to positive transformations in the international asylum policy. The Vietnamese exodus phenomenon of 1.6 million people started after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and lasted for the next twenty years. This phenomenon has come to be considered one of the largest global displacements of refugees in the second half of the twentieth century. The Vietnam exodus follows the *Syria Project*, by the same artist, made between 2011–2015, which was exhibited at the fifty-sixth Venice Biennale (Starr 2019).

With the aim of providing detailed statistics and scenarios about the exodus, Chung's *Vietnam Exodus Project* is characterized by a hybrid methodology, combining the creation of artistic objects—films, photographs, paintings, cartographic drawings, and textiles—with ethnographic fieldwork and academic and analytical research. The artist engages with communities through a diversity of means and languages from visits to detention centers (US), interviews with refugees, archive research, statistics, among others. All the work developed is disseminated through artistic installations situated in various locations as well as through public or private meetings with all the actors connected with refugee policy (Starr 2019).

One of the reasons why Chung explores this theme is related to her personal life. She is a Vietnamese refugee, along with her family, who went to live in the US after 1975. In this sense, she is acutely aware of the ethical and political issues that characterize her artistic practice. The life stories and past experiences that the artist draws on are intended to gain insight and contribute to political change at the highest level (Starr 2019).

When Chung decided to undertake *The Vietnam Exodus Project*, her motivation was artistic, and it is from art that the political dimension can emerge in an innovative way, empowering plural points of view and research to give it materiality. The project was transformative both in terms of artistic practice and, above all, in social terms, in that it contributed to “policy-making and legislation on human rights” (Starr 2019, 19). This result was made possible mainly thanks to the hybrid methodology that combined the presentation of the artistic work resulting from the development of the project with the relational dimension of dialogue with the various project actors. In this sense, in 2017 and 2018, after having held three art exhibitions of the project in Hong Kong during 2016, 2017, and 2018, Chung held public forums where she directly interacted with former refugees who shared their life stories with NGO volunteers, human rights lawyers, police officers, and a former officer from the Department of Correctional Services. Through her collaboration with emerging Vietnamese

painters, the artist was able to raise awareness of many young Vietnamese to the reality of the exodus from Vietnam because there was widespread ignorance due to the fact that it had been erased from Vietnam's official history (Starr 2019).

In the current context, the *Vietnam Exodus Project* is quite pertinent, demonstrating affinities with the current critical situation of Syrian refugees in Europe who, among other things, are subjected to the enormous passivity of the international community, as well as with the Hispanic and African immigrants and the African refugees that we engaged with through the practice of art. With the *Vietnam Exodus Project*, Chung proves that the art of activist collaboration inspires a constant empathy and commitment to displaced populations (Starr 2019).

Shifting Ground

The *Shifting Ground* project is a participatory art and design initiative that began in July 2019 in the city of Cedar Rapids, Iowa and has continued in Lisbon, Portugal in 2021. To date, the project has been funded by the Iowa Arts Council and the Centre for Art History and Artistic Research of the University of Évora, Portugal. It also has had the support of a number of institutions, such as the Iowa Ceramic Center and Glass Studio, St. Paul's United Methodist Church, and the Immaculate Conception Church. The project consisted of the development of two workshops with Hispanic immigrants and African newcomers in collaboration with volunteers and artists, namely our collaboration with the artist and emeritus professor at Mount Mercy University, Jane Gilmore (Figure 1) (Gorgel Pinto and Reaes Pinto 2020).



Figure 1: Ceramic Sculpture Workshop at the St. Paul's United Methodist Church

These new citizens of Cedar Rapids come from Honduras and Mexico, in the case of Latin America, as well as from Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo, as far as participants from Central Africa are concerned. At a time, when immigration policies show growing intolerance and social injustice, we wanted to demonstrate that the visual arts, in particular, as well as culture in a broader sense, are effective means of promoting difference. None of us can predict if or when we might face similar circumstances—forced to flee from war, famine, or natural disaster and to live ever-changing temporary spaces, without a country or a home (Gilmore, Pinto, and Pinto 2019). As philosopher Hannah Arendt (2013) states in her text *We, the Refugees*, which was originally published in 1943 in the *Menorah Journal*, these people are not refugees but are instead immigrants or new arrivals since their displacement is not due to some act committed in their country of origin. She herself was a displaced person who was

forced to leave her country of origin, Germany, to emigrate to the United States. Because of her Jewish origin, the Nazi regime removed her nationality in 1937, so she became stateless for fourteen years until she obtained North American nationality in 1951 (Arendt 2013).

Seeking a better future in a new place is something common to all living beings, and we, as intelligent beings integrated into civilized societies, must offer new forms of reception and inclusion that incorporate the arts and encourage creative thinking and the use of the imagination as survival strategies. Through the *Shifting Ground* project, we hope to empower and give visibility to undervalued immigrant groups in their community and thus develop social and cultural sustainability (Gorgel Pinto and Reaes Pinto 2020).

Action as a Tool to Build Citizenship in a Space of Pluralism

The idea of *action*, inherent in the *Shifting Ground* project, is in part associated with the concept of *vita activa*, created by Arendt. According to Arendt (2001) in *The Human Condition* (first published in 1958), *vita activa* is related to three fundamental activities of human public action: *labor*, *work*, and *action*. By *labor*, Arendt (2001) refers to the basic activities of the human being as a naturally biological being in order to satisfy vital needs. By *work*, she means the general activity by which the human being comes to dominate nature instead of submitting to it. Finally,

the *action* itself, which is the horizon in which the human being transcends his condition of worker to impose himself as a citizen. It is the foundation of the public sphere and the full exercise of citizenship in a space of plurality and pluralism, and necessarily mediated by discourse. This is also the moment in which the word “freedom” gains a concrete character. (Arendt 2001, 20–21)

For Arendt (2001, 20–21), it is as “an actor—a being who acts, that the human being proves his freedom.” Thus, the concept of *action* is the basis of all human organization in the development of the two workshops, as it considers the multiple identities of all participants. *Action* also has special relevance in the *Shifting Ground* project since it brings new value to the public cause and promotes participation and inclusion among citizens as an activist action capable of generating transformation, in particular, by integrating migrants into a new culture.

Using the etymology of the Greek word *archein*, which means “to begin,” “to lead,” and eventually “to govern,” we can find a sense of *action*, considering the fact that the word “acting” in its most general sense means to take an initiative and to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*) (Arendt 2001). This *action* concept is central to the art and design practice of the *Shifting Ground* project, reinforcing the political dimension as a tool for the empowerment of a displaced community.

Going back to the origin of the project in question, there was an initial desire on the part of the artists to work with the newcomers to Cedar Rapids to enhance their cultural integration into the new place in which they live (Figure 2). All the synergies that were created between the will of the artists and the stakeholders, such as social, municipal, and artistic institutions, as well as the migrants themselves, revealed, according to Arendt, that all the participants, because they were newcomers and beginners, took the initiative; they were led to act to carry out the project. In Arendt’s (2001, 226) words: “It is in the nature of the beginning that something new is initiated. This surprising unpredictability is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins.”



Figure 2: Ceramic Sculpture Workshop at the Iowa Ceramic Center and Glass Studio (ICCGS)

Listening and Dialogue as an Empathetic Approach Methodology

A methodology of empathetic approach through *listening* and *dialogue* was used, focusing on sharing life stories, to explore the notion of cultural heritage as a means of creatively involving the participants in the workshops and of finding a sense of place in the new culture. In this regard, the creative process also worked as a form of knowledge, shared knowledge, and integration of the immigrant populations concerned. Art that is constructed by including the different perspectives of its participants is inherently ethical (Gablik 1992). Extending beyond materials, spaces, and the artistic media to embrace relational concepts and political issues, the aesthetics of collaborative art is closely linked to the social dimension (Lacy 1995).

This process, in which the active production results from an interaction based on the receptive *action* of *listening* among all the actors involved, evokes Gemma Fiumara's concept of *listening*. In her book *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening*, she mentions that, in the tradition of western thought, the term "logos" is mostly linked to "saying" and has no "recognizable references to the notion and capacity of listening" (Fiumara 1995, 1). This univocal, rationalist discourse authority of the western culture, characterized by a very specialized knowledge, generates "an incapacity of mutual exchange between discourses," (Fiumara 1995, 113) which leads to a fragmentation of knowledge. In this respect, Fiumara (1995) pleads for processes of *listening* anchored on a non-hierarchy of cultures as a way to build a plurality of knowledge to the detriment of the hegemonic rationalist perspective of Western knowledge and as the precondition of creative thinking. Developing an open *dialogue* leads to a more ecological society and mutual recognition among their members and promotes the equity of different cultures and knowledge. In this respect, the empathetic approach based on *listening* and *dialogue* is a key feature of the participatory projects that take place with the contributions of participants other than artists through learning based on the different perspectives, experiences, and practices of all the actors involved.

Listening to the Other, which means giving voice in a dignified way to the *Shifting Ground* participants representing some of the more vulnerable population in Cedar Rapids to promote more equity in society, also considered the notion of *enlightened listening*, created by philosopher David Levin (1989). This concept relates to a sense of mutual *listening* among the participants in the project, encouraging the sharing of participants' diverse perspectives and promoting inter-knowledge between both. The importance of *listening* is focused on the well-being of people and on their relationship with the environment as far as it is a way to encourage

the sharing of mutual knowledge (Levin 1989). The interaction among all the participants that characterized the *Shifting Ground* project also embedded the holistic perspective of physicist David Bohm (1992) in that it sought to increase the quality of life of human beings both in terms of their interrelations and in terms of their connections with the environment. His perception of the world as a whole, where all parts are interrelated in a dynamic process, is built on the behavior of subatomic particles. Electrons are interwoven within their environment and cannot be disconnected from their context, which includes the observer. In this respect, Bohm (1992) has a crucial role in the importance attached to *dialogue* as a learning process to listen to the Other by enjoying the relationship between people and helping to solve social problems, which contributes to a beneficial innovation of relations among people.

Action and Thing as a Methodology for Co-creation Work

Focusing on the notions of deterritorialization and identity associated with multiple relocations, the workshops began with playful interaction among migrant citizens, characterized by their life stories and artistic practice based on ceramic technology. Extrapolating Arendt's concept of *action*, the words and actions inserted them into the interaction between all the participants, which did not result from a need, such as *labor*, nor was it induced by utility, such as *work*; rather, it was stimulated by the presence of others to whom each one of us wishes to adhere (Arendt 2001).

The first phase of the project focused on the idea of a game, in which each participant would have to share a memory, a talent, and an object; the three elements had to be related to each other as well as to each other's personal experience. The reactions and ideas generated by the participants' perceptions gave rise to impulses for *action*. After the inscription of the respective memory, object, and talent, with the expectation that this relationship could mean the expression of each participant's individual freedom, reliefs in clay were produced. In this phase, the main ideas were synthesized through the combination of words, images, and textures. According to Arendt (2001), only with the revelation of the agent in the act, the *action* maintains its specific character revealing the *who*, the unique and distinct identity of the agent, transcending the mere productive activity and attributing meaning to the whole creative process and not only to the final product. An individual approach followed, in which forms of abstraction were suggested that would lead to the making of clay sculptures (Figure 3).

Shifting Ground's participatory process involves creating things. The notion of *ding* or *thing* from the work Actor-Network Theory by philosopher Bruno Latour (2005; Latour and Weibel 2005), due to the performative, relational, plural, comprehensive, and, simultaneously, dematerializing character that the meaning of the term implies, was noteworthy.

Opposing the idea of *Realpolitik* (political realism or practical politics) as a positive, materialistic form of interest in dealing with naked power relations, Latour (2005, 4–5) uses the German neologism *Dingpolitik* (politics of the thing) to designate: “a set of risky experiments and attempts to probe what it could mean for political thought to change the course of *things* and become a little more realistic than has been attempted until now.” In other words, the author advocates a “thing-based democracy” rather than a “matters-of-fact policy.” This transition aims to replace or create a new way of dealing with a theme common to all social sciences and, above all, to the political sciences, “activity.” and “agency,” commonly attributed to human beings (Latour and Sánchez-Criado 2007). It should be noted that the word “ding” or “thing” has meant the issue that brings people together because it divides them for many centuries, both in the Nordic and Saxon contexts and in the Latin context (Latour 2005).

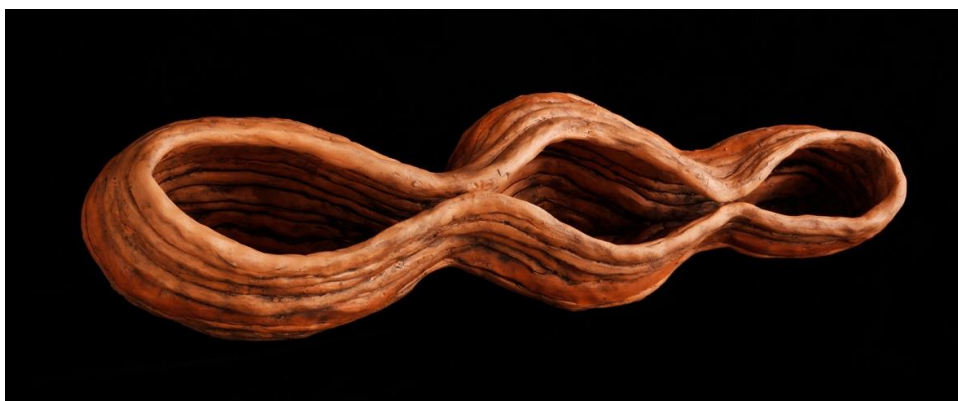


Figure 3: Ceramic Sculpture by Florence Nshimirimana Taylor, Newcomer African Immigrant
 Source: Van Allen 2019

Considering that human beings may be more united by their concerns or their problematic/occupying “matters of concern” in contemporary issues such as river pollution, the melting of Greenland’s glaciers, the shrinking of pension funds, the unemployment of a family member, and the Islamic veil in France rather than by another set of values, opinions, or attitudes, Latour (2005) considers a policy focused on objects rather than a policy focused exclusively on people to be more fruitful. In this sense, because they unite human beings more, the author now refers to matters of concern, initially considered as objects, as *things*. For Latour (2005, 5), “each object reveals a different set of interested parties and the possibility of a plurality of ways to achieve a partial resolution. Although each object—each question—triggers different emotions, disturbances, agreements and disagreements, there is continuity and coherence in what we are connected to.”

The *Shifting Ground* project also deals with issues related to immigration, politics, cultural heritage, willingness to give a voice to immigrants, search for the integration of newcomers into to new culture, sculpture workshops, and dialogue with potential immigrant participants to listen to their interest in participating in the project, among others, which brought us together and impelled us to act (Figure 4). These issues, which are considered *things* and “matters of concern,” according to Latour (2005, 5), are “objects uniting us all in the way of mapping a public space profoundly different from what is normally recognized under the label of ‘the political.’” Concerned with giving visibility to this public space, to the concerns, taken as objects, that unite people, Latour (2005) goes back to the etymology of the word “res-public” meaning “thing—public” to focus on the *thing* that creates a public around it.

The *action* of all participants resulting from the *things* that brought us together triggered the two workshops in the context in which games, ceramic objects, videos, photographs, installations, and interviews were created through a process of interaction based on *listening* and *dialogue* between all participants. In this sense, all these constructions carried out within the project and, in particular, during the process, are also understood as *things* since they are the reason why people get together and associate with each other. *Things* emphasize the relationship of interdependence between people and the issues that move them and the possibility of new experiences.

Participatory approach projects are a constant process of producing *things*. This concept of *thing* is perfectly intertwined with the very nature of the participatory *Shifting Ground* project, which by being open, based on the paradigm of *listening* and intersubjective vulnerability, ensures that the project is built by the interdependence of all participants, involving notions of respect, responsibility, and trust (Reaes Pinto 2013). Artistic practices that are actively involved in social and political life have, as their most significant contributions, the questioning of and interaction with everyday social life through actions that take place over an extended period of time as well as the production of innovative images and forms of communication (Lippard 2006).



Figure 4: Final Exhibition at the ICCGS with Participants, Families, Local Artists, Citizens, and Public Representatives
 Source: Bradley 2019

The Community's and Participants' View

Within the *Shifting Ground* project, a series of interviews were conducted with a group of participants and people in charge from the supporting entities. The opinion of the volunteers who collaborated in the initiatives was also collected. The latter recognized the quality of the project, mentioning that it was a learning experience that demonstrated other possibilities of approaching migrant and refugee communities.

Keesha Burke-Henderson, the Director of Diversity and International Student Success at Mount Mercy University, who was responsible for overseeing the educational experience of international and minority students, emphasized the importance of students being able to communicate through art. As the tutor of four of the participants, Burke-Henderson highlighted the fact that this kind of approach favors communication with immigrants and refugees and that they reveal more personal characteristics, which facilitate a more uninhibited and meaningful social and cultural integration. Finally, she manifested the intention of promoting similar initiatives through short interventions, such as in the *Shifting Ground* workshops, which she considered to be very productive in terms of increasing creativity and promoting the emancipation of immigrant and refugee citizens.

Two of the youngest participants, Francine Niyonyishu and Anna Tuyisenge, were born in Africa and immigrated very early to the US. Both showed a willingness to participate in more art activities. They particularly favor this kind of community engagement by valuing their talents, memories, and culture.

In the case of the adult participants, the feedback was also very positive. Helen Mensah-Blevi mentioned that she had no experience working with ceramics or sculpture, but she liked the piece she created very much. Mensah-Blevi valued the two exhibitions held and the recognition generated in the Cedar Rapids community. In her turn, Sonia Mounzeo-Mampassi emphasized the playful approach in the creation process, recognizing some difficulty in developing an abstraction and consequent materialization into a clay sculpture. Mounzeo-Mampassi highlighted the guidance given by the team of artists, both at the conceptual level and in the field of technique. This participant expressed interest in getting involved in more ceramic art activities as well as in the dissemination of these initiatives among her closest contacts. Finally, among the adult participants, Erisa Niyibhitanga, who also had no experience working with clay modeling, started the creative process with some fear and anxiety but gained the

necessary confidence with the support of the artists and volunteers present at the workshop. Niyibhitanga highlighted the spirit of collaboration among the participants as well as the exhibitions held, which contributed positively to the appreciation of immigrant citizens.

The final event was an outstanding moment highlighted by the immigrants and refugees who participated in the *Shifting Ground* as well as by all those who were present at this action (Figure 4). In general, everyone emphasized the fact that the exhibition was a clear celebration of immigrant culture and solidarity among different local communities, namely by showing the most creative side of the communities involved and family participation in the event, with live music from Central Africa and a playlist of Mexican music, which they found exciting. Also, the presence of the mayor of Cedar Rapids was noteworthy, among other personalities from the city, who were impressed with the project final presentation.

The positive feedback after the participation in the *Shifting Ground*, as well as the media coverage by the local press, are also indicators that reveal the importance of this kind of local initiative in welcoming immigrants and refugees. It is also an indicator that the methodology used is adequate and impactful. We believe that the synergy among stakeholders is a decisive factor for the transformation of society into something more equitable and sustainable in the social and cultural realm. This is a process that should be supported by local entities and maintained in a systematized way.

Conclusion

Within the creative process of participatory art projects, *action* is an effective tool for citizenship and the integration of underprivileged communities. First of all, *action* is the support of all the people involved in the workshops as it includes their plural identities. In addition, *action* has a prominent role in the *Shifting Ground* project in valuing non-hierarchical citizen participation and public cause. This active *action* produces transformation by contributing to the inclusion of migrants into a new culture.

It is important to stress that the effectiveness of the *action* within this participatory art practice is due to a methodology of empathic approach through *listening* and *dialogue* focused on sharing participants' life stories. This approach allowed us to explore the notion of cultural heritage as a means of creatively involving the migrants in the workshops and enabling the development of co-creation. In this context, the creative process is a form of knowledge, and *listening* and *dialogue* are processes based on non-hierarchical cultures as ways to build a plurality of knowledge, improve social relations, and benefit human connections with the environment and are ultimately the precondition of creative thinking. In this regard, the empathetic approach anchored on *listening* and *dialogue* is crucial to the participatory art projects, which require the contributions of all the actors through learning based on the plural perspectives, experiences, and practices of all the participants involved.

The *Shifting Ground* participatory art practice was a constant process of creating *things* in that it involved concerns related to immigration, wills, and the development of sculpture workshops. The *action* of all participants resulting from the *things* that brought people together generated the two workshops in the context in which games, ceramic objects, videos, photographs, installations, and interviews were created through a process of interaction based on *listening* and *dialogue* between all participants. The *Shifting Ground* methodology and methods based on notions of *action* and *thing* fostered new knowledge development through the reciprocal relations among all the participants.

This project has continued in Lisbon, Portugal, with identical groups of migrant citizens. Two workshops were developed in a ceramic research center. Afterward, an exhibition happened at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Lisbon, with the ceramic works done in Portugal, the photographs of the sculptures made in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and a video documenting the workshops process.

Acknowledgement

Funding for *Shifting Ground* is provided by the Iowa Arts Council, a Division of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, the City of Cedar Rapids, Iowa; the Iowa Ceramics Center and Glass Studio; Mount Mercy University's Janalyn Hanson White Gallery; and Cedar Rapids Bank and Trust. This research was also financed with Nacional Funds through FCT—Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, within the scope of the project: CHAIA/UE (UI&D 112)/2020 – [Ref. UIDB/00112/2020]. The *Shifting Ground* project obtained informed consent to use the participants' images and real names.

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