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## MOBILIZING ART

*An inquiry into the role of art in social movements  
The case of Macao – Milano*

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# CONTENTS

Abstract	p. 5
<b>Chapter 1 – Framing Art &amp; Political Mobilization</b>	<b>p. 7</b>
1.1 Introduction	p. 7
1.2 The struggles of deliberative democracy	p. 10
1.3 Making Sense of Macao	p. 15
1.4 (Re)thinking art in mobilization	p. 21
<b>Chapter 2 – Methods</b>	<b>p. 27</b>
2.1 Revealing the backstage of an ethnographic study	p. 27
2.2 Getting in, getting on	p. 29
2.3 Case selection and research techniques	p. 33
<b>Chapter 3 – Art’s Own Activism</b>	<b>p. 39</b>
3.1 Introduction	p. 39
3.2 A magic hat in a digital world	p. 40
3.3 Strolling to the skyscraper	p. 43
3.4 The Galfa event	p. 46
3.5 Media practices	p. 50
3.6 The explanatory power of connective logic	p. 53
3.7 The eventful logic	p. 56
<b>Chapter 4 – Organizing Relations</b>	<b>p. 59</b>
4.1 Introduction	p. 59
4.2 Framing organization in hybrid movements	p. 60
4.3 The strength of strong ties	p. 63
4.4 Taking care of conflicts	p. 68
4.5. Relations in practice	p. 73
4.6. Findings	p. 81
<b>Chapter 5 – Producing Culture in the Neoliberal City</b>	<b>p. 87</b>
5.1 Introduction	p. 87
5.2 Alternative forces as cultural producers in the creative city	p. 90
5.3 Aim and methodology	p. 90

5.4 Milan cultural strategies	p. 90
5.5 Is Macao an alternative answer to the “creative city”?	p. 91
<i>Macao within the political arena</i>	<i>p. 92</i>
<i>Macao within the creative milieu</i>	<i>p. 96</i>
5.5 Conclusions	p. 97
 <b>Conclusion</b>	 <b>p. 99</b>
 <b>Bibliography</b>	 <b>p. 107</b>



## Abstract

The connections between art and politics are multiple and are deeply rooted in modern history. These connections have led to the development of a lively debate in many academic as well as non-academic fields. Within this context, my thesis focuses on the specificities, the continuities and the ruptures produced by artists in the context of contemporary political mobilization. My overall framework is influenced by a cultural approach to social movements, organization studies, economic and urban sociology. Based on ethnography, my thesis applies three main research techniques (participant observation, semi-structured interviews, digital methods) to a specific case study: Macao, the New Centre for Arts, Culture and Research, in Milan, Italy. Established in May 2012, Macao is officially a part of the Italian network of “Occupied Theatres” and, more informally, constitutes an important node in the international “art activism” scene. Taking into account the global context of the early 2010s – marked by the aftermath of economic crisis, the Arab revolutions and the Occupy/Indignados movement, and the re-emerging discourse on the role of electronic media in social movements – my thesis, although focused on Macao in a micro-sociological perspective, attempts to draw connections and identify differences between “artistic activism” and the prevalent trends in the recent wave of mobilization.

In an attempt to contribute to the growing, but still limited, literature on art and social movements, my thesis considers Macao as an excellent prism through which to investigate the everyday political work carried out by artists in a context of mobilization. In doing so, my aim is to overcome the instrumental view that is often applied to art and aesthetics in the context of protest: seeing them as colorful tools to gain visibility and secure recruitment. In my work, I highlight how art might take unexpected forms in political activity, forms that are rarely embodied in the artifacts we are normally used to. In this sense, art is capable of running deep below the perceivable surface to connect and innervate the flows that circulate in a number of different media.

The thesis is divided into two main parts: the first sets the frame in which I situate my work, introduces the debates around artists’ political involvement (Ch. 1) and presents the methodological framework (Ch. 2).

The second part is made up of three chapters that explore what I have come to identify as the main areas of Macao’s activity: action, relation and production. The first of these three chapters (Ch. 3) deals with the logic of action, in which I stress how an artistic sensitivity was deeply embedded in the first spectacular events that granted Macao a wide and favorable national and international exposure: what I have defined as an eventful logic. The second (Ch. 4) explores the theme of organization, a key area of political intervention of Macao activists, in which a reflexive desire for instability is coupled with a surprising efficiency and the inversion of the traditional equation for which organizational forms become transient configurations determined by the eventfulness of their routine activity. The third and final chapter (Ch. 5) investigates Macao’s models of artistic and cultural production. The case is explored with the aim of understanding to what extent Macao, and more in general the global wave of art activism, constitutes an alternative to the neo-libel articulation of the creative city in Milan. On the one hand, I ask whether Macao is a political actor able to influence the local cultural policy and to what extent it is included in the urban governance of Milan. I argue that Macao not only is an actor included in the urban governance, but also it provides the city a different cultural offer, open to bottom-up processes. The three core chapters, although partially autonomous, present a *fil rouge*, which coincides with the hypothesis that a broader change in terms of social and economic critique is taking place at a global level. As processes like the “eventification” and the “brandization” of culture represent some of the most efficient capitalist devices they now come to be appropriated in critical terms by probably the most skilled and apt subjects for a change: artists, and, more generally, cultural workers. Often trained at prestigious education institutions within the creative industry, their critique deploys the knowledge they have paid to obtain, and attempts not just to antagonize but to create a real and viable alternative. In the conclusion, the different uses of art in mobilization, scattered around the whole thesis, are systematized.



# Chapter 1

## Framing Art and Political Mobilization

### 1.1 Introduction

Within the field of sociology<sup>1</sup> it seems that there is a perception that a *crisis* of democracy is occurring at the present time. The literature, although originating from different perspectives, converges in underscoring a legitimacy and representation deficit in the present democratic systems. In particular, at a national level, the literature insists on the peculiar anomalies of the Italian political system that shows, on the one hand, a globally underdeveloped civil society profoundly differentiated along the north–south axis (Banfield, 1958; Putnam, 1993; Sabatini, 2005; Cartocci, 2007) and, on the other hand, a political/institutional system colonized by the party system. Such anomalies must be considered in association with a number of symptoms which globally affect democratic systems: the emergence of sub-politics (Beck, 1992), the reduction of nation-state sovereignty in regard to strategic issues in favour of supranational institutions<sup>2</sup>, the transformation of political mass parties into *cartel parties* (Katz and Mair, 1995) and the loss of the representativeness of labour unions. According to Crouch (2004), we are living in *post-democratic* political systems in which – while formal democratic institutions legitimated solely by elections continue to be reproduced – there is a progressive weakening of the legitimacy of policies and politics.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the recent economic crisis which started in 2008 rendered more acute the consequences of neo-liberal capitalism<sup>4</sup> not only for the traditional weaker subjects in society but also for the middle classes. In such a context of increasing social and economic inequalities<sup>5</sup> a number of

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<sup>1</sup> See: Gray and Caul (2000), Putnam (2000), Crouch (2004), Dalton (2004), Held (2006), Rosanvallon (2006), Todd (2008), Formenti (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Although in the international relations debate realist and neo-realist scholars posit, to a varying extent, the crucial role of the state in the fields of monetary policy and national defence. Cf., respectively, Helleiner (1995) and Kirchner (2007).

<sup>3</sup> To understand the proportions of this crisis it is relevant to cite the results of a survey (n=24,000) conducted by Gallup in 2002 and cited by Castells (2004), which reported that two-thirds of the world's population believes that their countries are not governed in accordance with their peoples' will.

<sup>4</sup> We refer in particular to the preeminence of financial operations within the capitalist paradigm (Gallino, 2011) which has been understood as a response of the owners of the means of production (as a class) to the reformist decades of the 1960s and 1970s (Gallino, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. United Nations Development Report 2011 (UN Development Programme (UNDP), 2011). The main trend is a decreasing Human Development Index (HDI) registered in all countries, regardless of their original level of HDI. Social inequalities and environmental threats are thus affecting such highly developed countries as South Korea (-17% in HDI) or Czech Republic (-5%) and underdeveloped countries as Sierra Leone (-42%) and Bangladesh (-27%). Also, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has released a report which confirms this negative trend (OECD, 2011).

actors in civil society<sup>6</sup> are standing up and protesting. Since the late 1990s, a large number of social movements have reached the public stage. For analytical purposes, we believe these can be separated into three main strands, according to their organizational form and the political culture they embody. The first strand looks back to the experiences that can be grouped under the heading of the “Global Justice Movement”. Throughout the last decade hundreds of national or local movements both virtually and physically joined a network whose most visible embodiments have been the World and European Social Forums. Apart from the more or less colourful parades they have staged and the episodes of violence in which these movements have been involved during the years their political stances have become less radical and increasingly reformist. Promoters and enactors of practices inspired by deliberative democratic ideals (della Porta, 2005), their political action aims to reform the current institutional edifice without calling into question its foundations. A galaxy of bottom-up, grassroots processes are envisaged as the only solution to legitimize, and to bring “real” democracy to, a nation or a supranational institution.

A second strand of movements, much more recent and at once politically close and organizationally distant from the first, is the wave of indignation sparked by the Arab Spring in late 2010 and early 2011. This network of movements, according to notable scholars (Castells 2012; Bennett and Segerberger 2012), showed how social media allowed the emergence of new patterns of organization for movements. The network infrastructure not just facilitates and renders incommensurably lower the cost of getting in contact but has rendered formal organizations obsolete. In this context unions, student associations, NGOs and the various civil society actors – bearers of the traditional *collective* logic – did not have a relevant role in the Occupy or Indignados movements,<sup>7</sup> which embody a different, *connective* logic. At any rate, Castells’ (2012) insightful analysis regarding the indignation wave allows us to trace a political continuity between this wave and the previous movements. Concerning, particularly, the Western cases of the Occupy “movement” in the U.S. and the Indignados in Spain – beyond a strong moralistic opposition to the inefficiencies of the ruling class in Spain or intolerable North American policies in favour of the 1% – we can witness a certain appeal to bottom-up, deliberative practices. This appeal to consensus has, more recently, caused violent reactions within the Occupy Movement itself, as is clearly showed by the

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<sup>6</sup> For our purposes here it could be reductive and misleading to refer to a commonly accepted notion of civil society to the extent that it implies a certain institutionalization of movements and a liberal political philosophy which postulates a rigid distinction between the different realms of society. Thus, we refer here to civil society as an umbrella term, and keep between brackets its normative implications.

<sup>7</sup> Bennett does not define them as movements but, to signal a transition in the organizational form, he prefers the term “large-scale action networks” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012).



article that appeared on February 2013 on the Occupy Wall Street official website, which stated:

Consensus process is the tyranny of the individual. It is the most anti-social of all processes because it allows any one person to assert irrational authority over an entire group of people and block any sort of decision making. It has nothing do with anarchism (even the IWW doesn't use consensus!) because it was invented by Quakers for religious reasons. It's stood in the way of progress, destroyed social movements, destroyed groups, destroyed communities, and relegated radicals to the fringes of American politics since the 70's when it was first popularized.<sup>8</sup>

Notwithstanding the intrinsic civic value of such events, and acknowledging their merits and the innovations they were capable of bringing about, the thorough enquiry into their values and ideals conducted by Castells and his team, allows us to show that they represented a political continuity, at least concerning the content. In a nutshell, they agree with the current institutional setting, they advocate more participation without putting into question the merits or demerits of representative democracy, they condemn the perversion of a certain financial-capitalism without questioning the capitalist system itself<sup>9</sup>. We could use, by stretching it a little, the concept of “undivisiveness” elaborated by Mauro Barisione (2009) for postmodern political candidates, to refer to the dynamics of such movements. According to Barisione, such candidates have “a generic and fundamentally non-partisan character: no core socio-political cleavages are evoked and no zero-sum policy solutions are emphasised in the campaign’s communication strategy” (Barisione 2009: 50). Although the analogy might seem outrageous to some readers, the “99% against the elitist 1%” frame proposed by Occupy did not actually make it possible to grasp real political cleavages.

The third and last strand of movements is exemplified by the Italian network of occupied theatres. Although inevitably possessing some features that show their organizational continuity with the first two strands, they highlight the way in which the artistic/aesthetical component has come to play, I believe, a crucial role in the articulation of their instances. In fact, as I will try to briefly sketch in the second section, a significant part of the events brought

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<sup>8</sup> “Occupiers! Stop Using Consensus!”. URL: <http://occupywallst.org/article/occupiers-stop-using-consensus/> (consulted on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Slavoj Žižek made this point very clear when criticizing Occupy Wall Street said their vision was impaired by the “democratic illusion” for which “the acceptance of democratic procedures as the sole framework for any possible change [...] blocks any radical transformation of capitalist relations” (Žižek 2012: 87).

about by this network displays a repertoire of action which includes a massive use of artistic performances and visuals. In the next sections, after a brief outline of the deliberative debate and how its ideals and practices made their way into the movements, I will present my case study, highlighting its peculiar features and why current approaches in social movements are not entirely adequate. Finally, I conclude by presenting how I intend to proceed in my research, to cope with such limits.

## **1.2 The struggles of deliberative democracy**

In the context I have briefly outlined in the introduction, we can interpret the emergence of the deliberative paradigm as being a critique put forth by its theorists regarding the minimal conception of liberal democracy. According to della Porta (2011) deliberative theories developed to cope with the limits of representative democracy. More precisely, they were an attempt to try to include “critical citizens” within democratic institutions and processes since a belief was emerging that contemporary democracy had to combine representative and deliberative arenas. The main innovation is that, as against the aggregative model of given preferences posited by the more traditional liberal approach, they advocate a transformation of preferences through a discursive process oriented towards the definition of the common good (della Porta, 2011). Deliberation is based on two main tenets: consensus and reason. The first implies that an assembly that is inspired by deliberative ideals should reach a decision which is approvable by all of its participants, against a majoritarian rule where decisions are legitimized only by vote. A more cautious approach is the one proposed by Chambers (2003: 309) who states that “consensus need not to be the ultimate aim of deliberation [...] legitimacy of outcomes [...] ideally characterizes deliberation”. Secondly, reason is crucial to the extent that it represents the ideal medium, under certain conditions, for reaching an intersubjective agreement. Taking up the Habermasian frame (1996) deliberation is based on horizontal communicative exchanges, multiple content producers, the possibility of interacting, discussions backed by rational argumentation and a willingness to carefully listen to each other’s claims.

The field of deliberative democracy during the last two decades has experienced a golden age involving, in the first instance, a theoretical proliferation and, later, an empirical testing of the normative pre-conditions. Attempts to integrate theoretical normative reflection, empirical testing and subsequent revision of theoretical assumptions have been achieved only very recently, as in the case of the latest work of Jürg Steiner (2012), which also includes an interesting opening to storytelling in deliberation that I will discuss later. A first cleavage in the deliberative debate concerns the different arenas which theorists have, ideally, in mind.

Institutional arenas have been the main focus in the works of Steiner, who has mainly dealt with the parliamentary arena (Steiner *et al.*, 2004), and Joerges and Neyer, who were concerned with administrative committees (1997). More inclusive in terms of arenas is the Habermasian proposal elaborated in *Between Facts and Norms* (1996), which entails a double track, with informal deliberation taking place outside institutions, which tries to make its way up through what Habermas defines as the “hydraulic enclosures” and eventually reach the inner political system so that public opinion is able to affect institutional deliberation. More open to informal deliberation is Dryzek’s position (2000). Dryzek posits that social movements are indeed key actors for the creation of deliberative spaces, even if, in his view, the effect of such informal deliberation is to constitute a critical watch upon institutions rather than productive publics. This latter view is also shared by Mainsbridge (1996) who holds that informal arenas, such as social movements, are conceptualized as enclaves whose most prominent feature should be their distance from institutional power. For our purposes here an interesting analysis of the deliberative approach comes from the work of Iris Young. Young identified a gap in its rationalistic assumptions, to the extent that she believed that discourse, in a wider understanding, should not exclude other languages or codes of expression; in Young’s own words “processes engaged and responsible democratic participation include street demonstrations and sit-ins, musical works and cartoons, as much as parliamentary speeches, and letters to the editor” (Young, 2003:119). Such an analysis, although very relevant for my perspective – as regards giving an account of the relevance of art for mobilization and the making of political cultures – is not sufficient, since it still seems to be biased by a progressive paternalistic approach that tries to (re)assign dignity to popular ways of expressing dissent. A similar attempt in this direction has been made by Kenneth Tucker (2010). It is my belief, however, that beyond the praiseworthy endeavour to recognize such “popular” repertoires, Young and Tucker fail to capture the constitutive role that art plays in the forging of horizons and possibilities of action, and not just in the last moment, the perceivable expression.

Relevant for the present chapter is also the second cleavage we can identify in the deliberative debate: that is, the one which concerns the qualitative aspects of deliberation, with the polarity between rational argumentation and a more encompassing view which include practices such as storytelling, humour and narratives in general. For the reconstruction of this debate we draw upon the excellent analysis made by Steiner (2012) in his latest work. While Steiner’s personal position is midway between rational purism and openness to emotional and personal narratives – a balance between them has to be found according to the context (e.g. plenary session vs. private meetings) – he presents advocates of both sides.

On the side of openness we can cite Dryzek (2009: 1181), according to whom “deliberation can be open to a variety of forms of communication, such as rhetoric, testimony (the telling of stories), and humour. Real-world political communication generally mixes these different forms, and those that do not involve argument can be effective in inducing reflection”. An opposite view is held by Habermas who thinks that “jokes, fictional representations, irony, games, and so on, rest on intentionally using categorical confusions”.<sup>10</sup> Habermas’ position is well-known and, on this specific aspect, has been criticized to the extent that it is blind to how affects are constitutively linked to reasons. Susan Krause, inspired by Hume, affirms that “deliberation [...] is not devoid of intellect, but it involves more than merely intellect. The process of practical reasoning is a holistic one, in which cognition and affect are deeply entwined” (Krause, 2008: 103); for this reason she criticizes Habermas for not being able to acknowledge how affects and passions are inevitably present in his own concept of rationality. At any rate this interesting opening made by Steiner and many other scholars regarding the necessity of including different discursive components is surely a positive contribution to the extent that it will help us design more encompassing deliberative practices in institutional settings. Far from being overcome or solved, the dualism of emotion and reason is an archetypal feature of Western culture and a significant contribution in this regard was also recently made within the social movements debate (Goodwin *et al.* 2001). I will consider this more thoroughly in the next paragraph, where, in particular, I will stress to what extent it can be useful for the understanding of the Italian artistic mobilization.

Opening now the scope of our reflection to a wider political-philosophical horizon we can identify a third cleavage (in fact, a clash) between the deliberative paradigm – taken in all its internal heterogeneity – and the agonistic perspective. Pivotal in this regard is the contribution of Chantal Mouffe (1999) whose main point is arguing against the “passion” for consensus that is so widespread in the deliberative approach. In her account, we should acknowledge that any consensus exists only as the temporary result of a provisional hegemony – understood as a stabilized form of power, which always entails a certain degree of exclusion. For Mouffe the Habermasian idea that power can be dissolved<sup>11</sup> through a rational debate, and that legitimation might be based on pure rationality, is a mere illusion which could eventually endanger democratic institutions themselves. For Mouffe, the main aim of any democratic procedure, given an ontological pluralism of values which cannot be

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Basu (1999: 398).

<sup>11</sup> My understanding of Habermas’ discursive theory of the public sphere (1996) is that he does not advocate an illusory or idyllic dissolution of power. He rather seeks a more limited, although ambitious, linguistic fluidization of power. For this particular point I refer to the interpretation of Habermas’ work made by one of his most prominent fellows in Italy, Walter Privitera; in particular, Privitera, 2001.

reconciled in any consensus-oriented deliberative setting, is to achieve a peculiar form of recognition. A recognition of the other not as a radical other, an antagonist/enemy to be destroyed, but as an “adversary” – someone whose ideas we fight even while we never question her right to defend those ideas. From this point of view, conceiving the other as a legitimate opponent is the way to achieve what Mouffe defines as the ultimate aim of democratic politics: transforming antagonism into agonism. Such process requires that passions, in the various forms they might take, must find a way to be expressed in relation to *issues*.

So far we have concentrated on the clashes within the deliberative literature, and between this perspective and other philosophical conceptions of democracy. Now we propose instead a *paradoxical* continuity that is traceable between the deliberative trend in normative theory and its adoption among social movements in the last two decades. This is a paradox because of the apparent antinomy between the (stereo)typical a(nta)gonistic posture of movements and the orientation towards consensus which seems to be sought both within the movements and in the negotiations with the institutional actors. I believe it is important to investigate this paradoxical link from the point of view of the effects of social science research on society—or, in other words, the public role of social science research. A sociological starting point for this discussion is the Heideggerian concept of *hermeneutic circle*, which can be conceived as “a movement of reciprocal tuning which is produced in the comprehensive investigation between subject and object” (Sparti 2002:154)<sup>12</sup>. Anthony Giddens reworks the concept when he posits (Giddens, 1987) that social sciences, rather, show a *double* hermeneutic: that is, they are internal to its subject matter – the study of society – for it always affects or even transform it by conscious attempts. Moreover, taking up Jeffrey Alexander’s thought we can consider how material causes alone “Without being mediated by cultural representations [...] would not have effect” (Alexander 2011: ix). My attempt here is to include within the realm of cultural representations the intellectual production of scholars, a production that not only provides resources to social movements in regard to updating their organizational models, but also shapes their understanding of their own activity. The paradox, as I will try to show better in the next paragraphs, can be unmasked and shown to be a fake paradox if we orient our gaze towards the practices – to the things movements do.

Starting from the genealogical reconstruction proposed by della Porta (2005) we can see how “movements’ activists have adopted and adapted some of the values and norms elaborated

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<sup>12</sup> Translation from Italian is mine.

within deliberative theories of democracy” (della Porta 2005: 340). Their discussions have aimed to seek models of democracy that are alternative to the elitist, liberal and representative models diffused in contemporary Western democracies. This discussion moved also from the limits of social movement organization in the 1960s, based on direct democracy and stressing participation. A famous criticism of such a model was proposed by Jo Freeman (1970), by her concept of the “tyranny of structurelessness” which reflected the difficulty of implementing principles which stressed participation and the intensity of preferences. The relevant point is that in this process of the implementation of deliberative values they gradually lose the communitarian side that emphasizes direct action, self-organization and autonomy. Although these values are still relatively present in many of the 244 movements that are part of the Global Justice Movement surveyed in Donatella della Porta’s research (2009) they tend to vanish in more recent organizations and in transnational social movements, in favour of a tendency towards consensus-oriented deliberations.

Another cause of the shift, in addition to the already-mentioned “scholars effect” and the discussions which started in the movements, concerns the structural conditions that social movements faced after certain key events. In particular, growing attention has lately been paid to the transformative effects of police repression, and political violence more generally, on the praxis of movements. In this sense we could hypothesize a key role of the riots that took place during the G8 meeting in Genoa 2001 and around 9/11 in the U.S.. The work of Starr (Starr *et al.* 2011) makes clear that a first effect of repression is to divert an organization away from its activist programme and instead commit resources to self-defence. For example, “one organization that was illegally searched spent more than 1,500 hours of volunteer time dealing with the fallout for its membership and its relations with other organizations” (Starr *et al.* 2011: 109). Another effect is the replacement of the movement’s open culture with a security culture that undermines the movement’s politics and practices. The material and theoretical combination of these three factors has produced what we can define as a *deliberative turn* within the movements. My aim here is not to overstate the relevance of the scholarly debate in this process of change. In fact, as I will try to argue in the next section, it is also the progressive posture embodied in much of deliberative theory, and the functionalist approach still very present in the social movements debate, has led, I believe, to a difficulty in capturing the difference brought about by emergent artistically-inspired movements. Furthermore, as my contribution in this chapter is merely a theoretical one, my next task will be to highlight such a gap in the social movements debate. A blank that derives partially from: a) the relative innovations introduced by Macao as well as other movement of artists/art workers who produce an inter-textual discourse starting from artistic sensibility

through performative media – and more generally by the Italian network of occupied theatres which partially shares some of the Macao features; and b) the modernist “echo” still present in social movements studies, as highlighted by Lance Bennett.

The next section will briefly outline the history of Macao, and will propose a few examples of how I believe art is playing a constitutive role in the mobilization. It will also offer a chance to question some of the assumptions of social movements studies.

### 1.3. Making sense of Macao

To come back to the provisional typology of social movements I have briefly outlined in the introduction, we can now see that what is lacking in the first two experiences – GJM and the “Springs” of 2011 – is, I believe, an effort to imagine new ways to radically engage with the contradictions of the present. The idea that art can play a role in this task, as it has in the past,<sup>13</sup> is what has driven my interest in what I consider the third strand of movements. This last strand can be traced back to the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, 2001, when three activist groups initiated the Mayday parade in Milan: a group of self-organized casual workers, the Chainworkers Crew (CW), activists belonging to the “Bulk” social centre, and the local section of the Confederazione Unitaria di Base (CUB), a radical trade union. During the following years the core of this movement called for the involvement of more and more activist groups, leading to the parade’s exponential growth and to the establishment of a European network against precarious and atypical forms of employment. The early stages of this strand of movements does not present significant differences to more traditional social movements in organizational terms – rather, it is the subject, the atypical jobs and their social and economic questions, that begins to be present on the public agenda. According to Alice Mattoni (2012), most of the mobilization against precarity occurred during 2004–2005. Two mobilizations are particularly notable because I believe they constitute the real beginning of that network of movements of occupied art spaces and theatres in which I am interested, and that will be presented in greater detail later. The first is the “Reddito per tutt\*” actions, which saw the birth of the icon of “San Precario”, an imaginary saint who makes “miracles” in favour of the less lucky. Artistic performances set up by the Chainworkers Crew spread in the north of Italy and was finally established as a network of social movements, Grande Alleanza Precaria (GAP). The second mobilization is the *Serpica Naro* fashion show. This fashion show is an unconventional political action linked to the guerrilla communication tradition. The name *Serpica Naro*, an anagram of San Precario, refers to a fake Anglo-Japanese fashion

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<sup>13</sup> Although they are profoundly different we can think of the interplay between Italian Fascism and Futurism, or the inspiration Situationism provided to the rebellions of the long 1968.

designer that the Chainworkers Crew invented as the face for a real fashion show during the Milan fashion week at the end of February 2005. In one sense, the show was a media hoax. In another sense, the fashion show was an unconventional political action. Activists mobilized precarious workers employed in the fashion sector to speak about precarity in general and to present a self-produced fashion collection at the Mecca of the global fashion system, namely Milan fashion week.

These two cases, which were embedded in a wider movement, both in temporal and spatial terms, began to raise awareness about precarious work conditions and the existence of creative, art and knowledge workers. In fact, since 2007 Italy has witnessed a number of artistic occupations, beginning with the *S.a.L.E. Docks*, an independent space for visual arts and experimental theatre born in Venice (thanks to a group of activists who had come from the *centri sociali* experience and from autonomous social movements) with the aim of reversing those processes that privatize the art commons. Since 2011 six more spaces and theatres were occupied throughout Italy, establishing a tight network of movements whose aims exceed the improvement of their own category of art workers and take explicitly into account such issues as citizenship, urban planning, and cultural policy, both at the sectorial, local/municipal, and national/international level.

At first glance it appears to me to be interesting to investigate how a community of openly engaged artists (and sympathizers) deals with such issues – how art influences their capacity to aspire to, and to imagine, spaces for new forms of production and citizenship. This is why I have selected Macao, the Milanese “node” of the network, as a case study. In regard to some of its features, Macao is different from new social movements because, in Macao, art is not just an instrumental tool produced by external or peripheral subjects to the social movement. Furthermore, Macao are not interested in disrupting pre-existing identities, nor do they aim to achieve a recognition of their “new” identity of art workers by institutions. They are aware (as emerged in the workshop held in early December 2012)<sup>14</sup> of the structural contradictions of their position in the productive system, and the consequently ambivalent nature and extent of their agency. This is why such a case study should help to uncover issues that are central to my sociological interest. Understanding if, and how, art – a central inspiration for the theoretical and action planning of the movement – can substantially contribute to the prefiguration, and, in the last instance, creation, of radically different public spaces: spaces for citizenship, of course, but spaces which try to go beyond its traditionally acknowledged role within democracy (Balibar, 2011). In other terms, it is about putting to

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<sup>14</sup> [http://issuu.com/macao milano/docs/69300\\_ore](http://issuu.com/macao milano/docs/69300_ore).

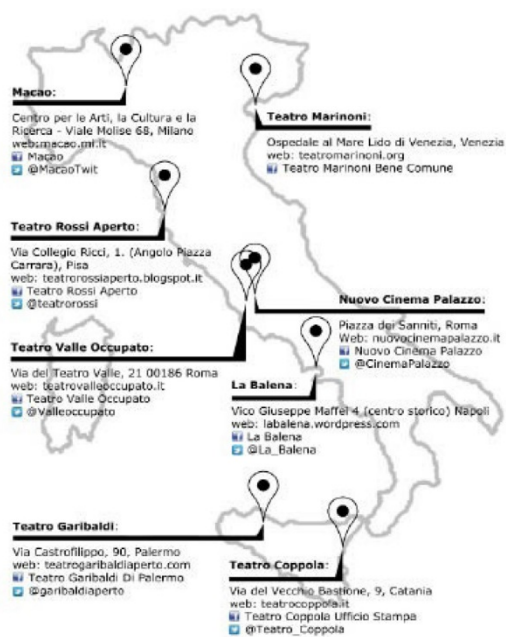


work the material, imaginative and positional excess (Rancière, 2007) the activists embody in order to transfigure and re-configure the spaces.

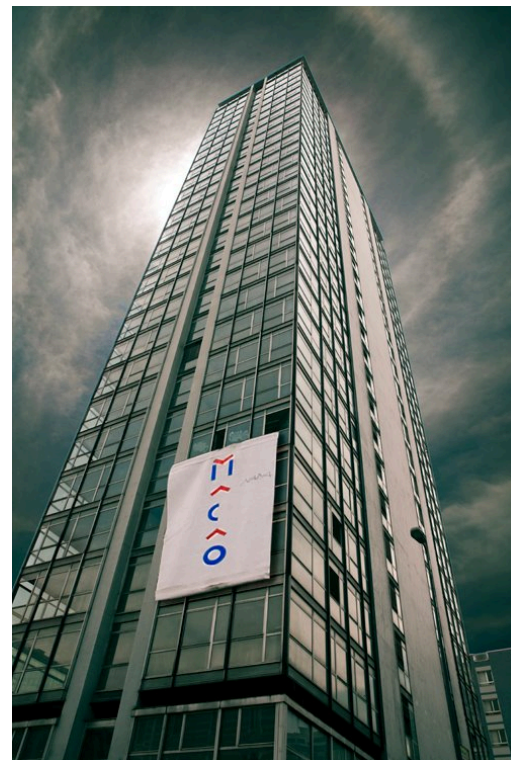
Macao became popular in May 2012 because of the occupation of a privately owned skyscraper, Torre Galfa, situated in the former business district of the city. The occupied space, on the one hand, functionally served to establish a centre for arts, culture and research, on the other, it symbolically caused a debate about the issue of the mass of unused spaces in Milan and, more generally, the issue of the role of art and culture in contemporary Italian society that is dominated by radically different interests and priorities. In terms of chronology, Macao is the last “movement” to join the wave of artistic occupations in Italy the first of which was the *S.a.L.e. Docks* in Venice, which, as has been said, was established in 2007. The actual and more consistent wave started in April 2011, when art workers occupied the Nuovo Cinema Palazzo in San Lorenzo, a popular neighbourhood in Rome that was being subjected to a process of gentrification. The Palazzo was about to be turned into a Bingo Hall. One month later, again in Rome, a similar spark led artists to occupy the Valle theatre. They occupied the theatre because “the Teatro Valle, a place that is of historical importance for Rome and for the country [was at risk of] [...] being awarded to private individuals who [would] betray the nature of a space dedicated to the contemporary theatre scene with an international scope.”<sup>15</sup> Occupations continued in Catania (December 2011), Naples (March 2012), Palermo (April 2012), and finally Milan (May 2012).

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<sup>15</sup> My translation of one of their claims. <http://www.teatrovalleoccupato.it/chi-siamo>.



1. Map of Occupied Theatres in Italy



2. Torre Galfa, Occupied by Macao

However, the roots of Macao go back to July 2011, when some of its future members joined the founding meeting of *Lavoratori dell'arte*, a group of artists, critics, curators, journalists and activists who believed that “art and culture should be a common good and that it is necessary to free them from the political interference which governs their production and determines the precariousness of artists”,<sup>16</sup> and “who verge their specificity and their languages within the common fight to precariousness which, although in different forms, is the hallmark of our times” (Cicarelli and Allegri, 2011).

In the following months the members of *Lavoratori dell'arte* (most of whom would later merge into Macao) established links with the emerging network of occupied art spaces and, in December, they took part in their first public demonstration, occupying the Contemporary Art Museum of Milan (PAC). At the end of January, after a meeting, the *Lavoratori dell'Arte* realized that they needed to open a “strongly operative” phase. The end of this phase, after a number of meetings, led to the first occupation of Torre Galfa on 5 May (and ended on 15 May), the second occupation of Palazzo Citterio (from 19 to 22 May) and the final occupation of Ex Borsa del Macello, on 17 June (ongoing). Macao’s activities are now proceeding along two main directions. The first direction, more internal and attended by “regulars”, takes the form of weekly general assemblies that are open to virtually everyone and thematic

<sup>16</sup> From the Macao Journal. <http://portale.macao.mi.it/script/diario.html>.

roundtables that involve at least weekly meetings on subjects such as: self-building, gardening, communication, workshops, city common goods, laboratories, economy/fund-raising, theory and action, video, sound, hacking. The second direction is Macao's artistic, cultural and entertainment programme, which is directed to the wider audience and to sympathizers (hosting live music, theatre performances, art installations, open and free workshops, a dance hall, a bar service etc.). In Macao we trace the presence of typical movement features, such as: the use of digital social platforms as tools to organize internally and also to foster the inter-movement network; the use of deliberative procedures to manage long and complex assemblies (the general assembly is held every Tuesday night and gathers about 50 individuals, most of whom take their turn to speak more than once, for an average total duration of four to five hours); the instrumental use of artistic visuals to attract attention: viral mash-up<sup>17</sup> videos and AdBusting<sup>18</sup> procedures which are especially concentrated in the pre-occupation moments and the first weeks of occupation, and are spread all over social channels and attract mainstream media attention, and thus mobilize a wider public. This is to say that, of course, we cannot speak of an entirely, radically new approach in regard to every single aspect. However, I think that the interesting logic of the underlying role of art can be grasped if we actively avoid the temptation to reduce the richness embodied in cultural and artistic forms to a simple calculus. In this regard, I think we should consider what Craig Calhoun has talked about when criticizing the attempt made by prominent social movements theorists – the need to bring back emotions to the field (Calhoun 2002: 49):

Most contributors to this volume have tacitly situated their attempts to bring emotions back in as either a challenge or an amendment to the reigning conventional wisdoms of political process theory, resource mobilization, and rational choice. Of course, approaches are not identical, but what they share in common is a more or less instrumental approach to questions of collective action. Instrumental thinking is dominant in the field because of the specific post-1960s struggles that have defined it, but it exists and has the intellectual power it has because of a much longer history linking reason to control (including control over emotions).

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzHflu33ROg&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>18</sup> <http://youtu.be/rr527Bduthc>.

Briefly sketching the social movements debate we can consider how the literature has, on the one hand, underlined that the “new” social movements intended to address the symbolic codes of society rather than society’s material structures (Melucci, 1996); on the other hand, scholars stressed the need to understand the role of emotions in mobilizations, neglected for decades and implicit in many concepts deployed also by more rationalist approaches to social movements (Goodwin *et al.* 2001). These points of view might well be relevant in research into artists’ mobilization to the extent that the symbolic is the field where art is mostly – although not exclusively – played out, and emotions are the source and the “natural” outcome of art performances and aesthetic experiences. Nonetheless, concerning my own particular aims, these points of view are of limited use since they do not take into account art as a field and as a set of visual and performative practices, and as bearers of a public and political function. Art in social movements studies is often understood as a strategic tool that is used in the mobilizing or the recruitment process, mainly in the popular and carnivalesque forms it might take in public demonstrations and parades (Tucker 2012), and not as the producer of the field itself and as a contributor to the establishment of a political culture. Considered the peculiar nature of a mobilization of artists/art workers brought about also by artistic means, as is the case in Macao, my point of view is that art should be understood in a much more encompassing way.

More recently, the uprisings in North Africa (the Arab Spring), in Spain (Indignados) and the US (Occupy Wall Street, which later spread globally), brought to the fore a debate about the role of digital social platforms in the organization, recruitment and life of such movements. Bennett and Segerberg (2012), considering the limits of classical approaches as regards making sense of these emerging phenomena, proposed a typology which differentiates between more traditional movements based on a *collective* logic and an emerging logic that they define as *connective*. The difference is built on the role of formal organizations (unions, advocacy groups etc.) within the movements: strong in the “old” movements and marginal or inexistent in the new, large-scale digitally networked mobilizations. In the latter case “digital media are the organizing agents” whose key role allows individualized actors – bearers of “self-motivated personal action frames” – to join in more readily, since the costs of cooperation are lowered thanks to the digital communication networks, and therefore the free-riding dogma postulated by Olson (1965) is overcome. The organizational shift granted by ubiquitous media, according to Bimber (2005), is even deemed to be responsible for recasting the public/private boundary – requiring, therefore, a new theoretical understanding of the public and/or the common good. Obviously the adoption of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is not a unique feature of the most recent

mobilizations – in fact global justice movements have adopted them since the late 1990s. The prominent difference is that when digital media are introduced in collective-logic driven movements “do not change the core dynamics of action”, while when introduced in the connective-logic movements “they do” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 739)<sup>19</sup>.

Although they acknowledge the existence of hybrid complex forms where both logics cohabit, the question for Bennett and Segerberg is a matter of definition, and essentially a dualistic one, in which we recognize a typical “Baumanian” individualized actor whose most prominent activity is to generically “share content” online. Notwithstanding their criticisms of the contemporary field of social movements,<sup>20</sup> where they still find echoes of a modernist logic that comes out in “assumptions about the importance of particular forms of organizational coordination and identity in the attention given to organizations, resources, leaders, coalitions [...]” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 750) their connective/collective dichotomy is still centred around an organizational paradigm to the extent that it envisages a new organizational pattern based on a techno-deterministic interpretation of social digital platforms. In addition to this main criticism I would like to underline how, from my point of view, this perspective fails to grasp what is really happening, to the extent that it ignores the content shared – the *things* which, in Latourian terms, fill the hybrid spaces (urban, local, digital spaces at the same time) of these movements.

#### 1.4 (Re)thinking art in mobilization

The relationship between art and mobilization is multiple and reveals a high level of complexity. Following the systematization proposed in one of the few works that is explicitly dedicated to the connections between the fields of art and mobilization (Balasinski and Mathieu 2006), we can find at least four ways in which art and mobilization intersect. In the first place, there is the *engaged artist*, whose talent takes an artistic shape to serve a cause that she feels worthy. Secondly, there are *collective struggles*, in which the art world might constitute the field or the *enjeux* – to use a French word that is often used by Touraine, the substantial and political meaning of which is difficult to translate into English (literally “what is at stake”). Such struggles illustrate the stances adopted by representatives of cultural

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<sup>19</sup> A point on the risk of endogeneity could be made here if one considers how the emergence of a phenomenon (digitally auto-organized networks without formal groups providing coercion or a selective incentive) is caused by the system itself (the digital social platforms). In other words, if this new organizational pattern is due to technological developments then there is a risk of endogeneity in positing that such platforms alter the core dynamics of action in those connective logic movements born “only” thanks to those digital platforms.

<sup>20</sup> For them the attention dedicated to identity, emotions, social networks, political process and opportunity structures is proof of the rejection, most likely only formal, of the core assumptions of resource mobilization theory.

associations or artistic collectives. Another way in which art and mobilization coalesce is in cases where contentious messages are delivered through artistic pieces.

Although the connections among the two realms are multiple few studies, especially within the field of social movement studies, have tackled the issue in any detail, with the exception of some isolated studies. Two studies are particularly relevant, the first is that by Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison (1998) which analyzes the influence of musical traditions on social movements, and in particular the relevance of American folk music in the protest wave of the 1960s. Secondly, the work of T.V. Reed (2005) which, studying the cultural expressions of several North American movements (from the black movement to the no-global wave), deals with the context of production, the contentious and aesthetic message of these movements, and the effects of their diffusion on society.

This relative lack of interest is even more striking if we consider the overlapping and borrowings that exist or have taken place between the field of art and that of political mobilization. In the first place, a shared lexicon seems to guide both fields if we think about words as movement and avant-garde, both used in art and in the social and political world to describe collective endeavours willing to establish a new aesthetic or political order. The connections, however, go deeper, if we consider how Howard Becker, in his classical work *Art Worlds* (1984), draws on the resource mobilization paradigm and in particular using the notion of repertoire of action which was initially created by Charles Tilly (1986) who, in turn, was inspired by theatre and jazz for the creation of the concept. More recently, James Jasper (2001), who has been more culturally-oriented in his approach to social movements research, has proposed to consider protest itself as an art, in an attempt to give fuller relevance to the creativity that exists in the actions of social movements. Another relevant overlapping is found in the work of Boltanski and Chiappello (2005), and in particular in their distinction between an artistic critique and a social critique. In a way that is somewhat reminiscent of the *vexata quaestio* between new and old social movements, their main thesis, in the interpretation by Lazzarato (2007), is that the two different kinds of critique are often developed and embodied by different groups and are incompatible. Furthermore, the artistic critique, which is embodied by highly skilled cultural workers, appears to Boltanski and Chiappello (2000):

Not in itself necessary to effectively challenge capitalism, a fact demonstrated by the earlier successes of the workers' movement without the support of the artistic critique. From this point of view, May '68 was exceptional

As we will see in the conclusion, one of the most important findings of my research is that artists are a more than necessary component in the attempts to challenge capitalism, especially if we consider the increasingly immaterial features that capitalism has assumed in the last three decades. If we combine this insight with an appreciation of the cultural trends in social movement theory we can see that the peculiar relevance of artists in political mobilization is due to the increasingly symbolic nature of struggles, even the most material ones. Alberto Melucci's work (1996) has insisted precisely on this point, and has also tried to unify the different traditions in social movements studies. And it is precisely artists, with their ability not only to decode the complex social and political reality but also to code and produce symbols and signs, to be among the most relevant figures in struggles. In fact, in every social movement that emphasizes meaning-making processes (Snow 2001) those social actors that possess a particular form of know-how in terms of production of meaning and manipulation of symbols – i.e. artists – come to play a fundamental role.

However, in order to better frame the issue of art in mobilization we need to orient our sights so as to capture the deeper relevance of art in collective processes. Following Eyerman (2006) we can think of art as an “imaginative space from which to view the world and from there to represent it” (Ivi: 18). This space is not situated in a sociological void, is not automatically granted an autonomy but is a “space within the space, a place to view the surrounding world from, yet not untouched by it” (Eyerman and McCormick, 2006: 7). As we will see in the following chapters, Macao's activists, in their multiple connections – being artists, workers, and citizens – question even more deeply the idea that being an artist, living like an artist and working like an artist, results in an idyllic and pacified condition.<sup>21</sup> The creativity assigned to art is central to the theoretical elaboration of Eyerman and is connected to his previous work (1998) in which he envisages art as *cognitive praxis*, that is “a form of social activity through which new kinds of social identities and practices emerge” (Eyerman 2006: 19). From this point of view, art is indeed a social activity and its fundamental mechanic does not differ substantially from other realms of social life. In order to assess art's relevance to mobilization it is thus important to make clear the context in which its meanings are produced, negotiated and eventually stabilized. In order to do this, the essential components of a meaningful sociology of the arts, according to Eyerman, are “a focus on the artwork and the artist while placing both against a complex historical background that includes artist's biography, the history of art, and the current social situation” (2006: 26).

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<sup>21</sup> On the complex inter-linkages between these dimensions, privileging a work-centred point of view, see Menger (2001).

Problems arise when the movements that are to be scrutinised are those, like Macao and the network it is a part of, which are created by artists whose critique inhibits their ability or willingness to create artworks as they are commonly understood in the art world. As artwork I do not solely refer to pieces with a representational element (painting, sculpture) but also to those abstract and immaterial ideas that are embodied in performances and in the social becoming of art. I mean that in order to understand Macao's artistic position we must think of it as a critique of the process of the institutionalization of social art by the art world and by curators (cf. Bourriaud 2002). This places Macao's artistic production and posture in an unusual position: affirming a social critique through artistic means, refusing the commonly accepted rules that prevail in their own field. This is the reason why, when I was asked during my research about the art in Macao, I tended to answer, somewhat puzzled, that there was little or no art as it is usually understood. This is probably due to the fact that art changes constantly – that art is essentially a mobile frontier, as I suggest in the conclusion. Art and mobilization, as the formulation itself suggests, appear to be weakly linked: they need a connector. In my research, after posing the main research question that inspired this work (how does art change social movements?) I came to realize that there is no direct link between the two, and that the connections had to be established in a grounded and contextualized way. Therefore, it is only as a result of a deep and long process of ethnographic research that I have been able to identify the three main areas in which a new kind of art has been changing the processes of social change. The three key dimensions I have identified are: action, relation and production.

Concerning the first dimension, my aim has been to analyse the way in which the artists of Macao deploy their political action. By investigating the origins of such action, and the symbolic production related to it, I propose the notion of "eventful logic" as a new pragmatic concept through which the strategies and the logics of collective action through social media can be satisfactorily explained.

In regard to the second dimension, focusing on the relations and organization of the movement, I have tried to capture the peculiar mechanics that Macao artists have deployed in order to cope with the functional and political imperatives that confront every movement. What is relevant is how, in their response to such challenges, artists deploy their imaginative excess in a number of different ways so as to create an unstable organization that is capable of remaining true to life while ensuring efficiency.

In regard to the third and final dimension, I explore the dimension of cultural production in relation to the fact that the Macao artists exist in an urban setting that is guided by a neo-liberal form of governance. I highlight how the political mobilization of Macao not only



seeks to compensate for the inefficiencies of the Italian welfare state, but it is also an area in which the radical imagination of the artists-activists of Macao is used to negotiate a position of power with the Municipality.

All of these dimensions are taken into account in my research, as I seek to go beyond an understanding of “art and social movements” as solely referring to the dimension of protest. In taking this broader perspective, I consider the mobilization of the artists of Macao as an extremely complex case study through which I hope to shed some light on the current reconfiguration of the relationship between art and criticism. I conclude this chapter with a quotation that I think is extremely relevant in regard to assessing what is at stake in this process of reconfiguration. This is a piece of writing that I came across once I was already engaged in the field, which attests to the extremely recent flourishing of literature on this particular interstitial area. The quotation is from Boris Groys (2014: 1):

Current discussions about art are very much centered on the question of art activism – that is, on the ability of art to function as an arena and medium for political protest and social activism. The phenomenon of art activism is central to our time because it is a new phenomenon – quite different from the phenomenon of critical art that became familiar to us during recent decades. Art activists do not want to merely criticize the art system or the general political and social conditions under which this system functions. Rather, they want to change these conditions by means of art – not so much inside the art system but outside it, in reality itself. [...] Art activists do want to be useful, to change the world, to make the world a better place – but at the same time, they do not want to cease being artists.



## Chapter 2

### Methods and Case Study

#### 2.1 Revealing the backstage of an ethnographic study

The first day I visited Macao was during May 2012. The Galfa Tower had recently been occupied and I was surprised that I had never noticed that 33-storey building which sat right next to the Pirelli building, one of Milan's most iconic skyscrapers. I happened to be there with a close friend and visiting Macao was just a way to explore something new that had recently happened in Milan. I was still in the first year of my doctoral programme, was sitting for exams and was trying to figure out a suitable case study for my research.

My Master's thesis dealt extensively with public sphere theory: I had investigated Italian political blogs in an attempt to evaluate their democratic potential. Through the works of Jürgen Habermas on public sphere theory, I had also approached literature that revealed the limits of thinking of democratic theory only in rational and discursive terms. Following the inspiring ideas contained in the volume curated by Nick Crossley (2004) I was struck by the juxtaposition that the essay of Michael Gardiner proposed between Mikhail Bakhtin and Jürgen Habermas. In his essay Gardiner proposed a critique that developed exactly the embryonic interest I had formed by the end of my Master's thesis: exploring what happens when elements that exceed linguistic limits break into the public sphere? Looking at Bakhtin's theory Gardiner could illuminate the shortcomings of the Habermasian approach:

Habermas fails to grasp adequately the significance of the embodied, situational and dialogical elements of everyday human life, mainly because his desire to supercede the constraints of a 'subject-centred reason' leads him to embrace an account of intersubjectivity that remains overly abstract and formalistic. In many respects, Habermas is an archetypally modernist thinker, one who strives to achieve a high degree of rational 'purity' and conceptual order. (Gardiner 2004: 29)

Departing from such understanding it became clearer to me that the intellectual posture embodied in the theory of the public sphere appeared as a tool that, as a result of Habermas' orderliness, lacked sociological realism – as Nancy Fraser voiced in her famous critique (Fraser 1990, 1992). As my theoretical interests changed, professional and political

experiences also contributed to my reorientation of my sociological focus. A key experience in this journey was my involvement in the organization of a theatre festival in Siena (2011). At this time I saw Emanuele rehearse a choreography that Balletto Civile – a theatre company Emanuele co-founded – had to perform at short notice because a theatre group had been forced to make a last minute cancellation. The festival was part of a broader European project coordinated by friends and colleagues in Siena and it explored the issue of the creolization in culture. I only came to realize one year later that Emanuele, whom I had seen dancing at Siena but had never actually spoken to, was part of the group that started Macao in June 2012. I can still remember the feeling of rapture I had while looking at the two dancers holding their hands, facing each other and spinning around a trampoline. The vaults of the medieval frescoed hall of Santa Maria della Scala framed them.

Meanwhile, during the spring of 2011 other colleagues from the University of Siena became part of a movement that was promoting a campaign for a referendum on public water. As I took part in their roundtables and debates, I had the chance to familiarize myself with the emerging paradigm of the commons (Mattei 2011). Initially used as a way to frame the idea of a common good *par excellence*, such as water, the idea of the commons later became the central theme of the mobilization of occupied theatres which extended the notion of the commons to culture and knowledge (Hess and Ostrom 2011). At the same time, theoretical discussions developed around the meetings of Lavoro Culturale (the Cultural Work), a series of seminars I had co-organized in Siena. The blog<sup>22</sup> we had set up to publish the materials from the seminars later became a wider space for cultural debate, hosting contributions that covered the first occupation of Teatro Valle in Rome (June 2011) by posting interviews with their protagonists.

It was in this context of political and cultural effervescence that my intellectual and research interests developed and progressed in new directions. Closely following the events of the spring of 2011 was a true inspiration for me, and it resulted in my idea of undertaking research on the movements that supported the campaign for public water – focusing in particular on the creative and performative elements. As I got closer to the movement, attending meetings as the European Social Forum held in Florence in November 2011, I realized that I was not interested so much in the performances and creative displays usually developed for use in demonstrations and protest actions. I was, rather, interested in how artists were re-shaping

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<sup>22</sup> [www.lavoroculturale.org](http://www.lavoroculturale.org).

the political field itself, by their own engagement in the public sphere. As I eventually came to realize, Macao constituted an excellent vantage point from which to observe the kind of processes I had studied in a theoretical form over the previous year.

I believe that for a sociologist, and especially for a qualitative sociologist who adopts an ethnographic framework, it is important to give an account of the backstage of any study. This is also one of the purposes of this chapter, also in the attempt to follow the methodological literature on autoethnography.

The term [autoethnography] has a double sense – referring either to the ethnography of one's own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest. Thus, either a self- (auto-) ethnography or an autobiographical (auto-) ethnography can be signaled by “autoethnography” (Reed-Danahay 1997: 2)

Notwithstanding the fact that it is increasingly difficult to define what is meant by an artist, I can confidently define myself as a not-artist. However, despite not being an artist myself I am tied to me to my own fieldwork by multiple personal connections, by overlapping fields of work and life, and by my belief that the cultural and artistic mobilization that started in June 2011 is probably one of the most productive, and is one of the widest, mobilizations that Italy has seen since the turning point of Genoa in 2001. Theory, life, friendships and passions are all equally constitutive of the endeavours of a sociologist, and thus I deem it necessary to account for them publicly. Since research and life come very close together in my case I think transparency and accountability are fundamental in order to secure the validity of the qualitative work I have conducted.

## **2.2 Getting in, getting on**

Traditionally, two phases define the relation of the ethnographer to the field (Buchanan *et. al.*, 1988). In this part, I will present the different phases that characterized my access to Macao: getting in and getting on.

### *Getting in*

I had started following Macao's activity in the movement's early days, but I chose Macao as my ethnographic field of study only months later: during the late summer of 2012, to be precise. During those interstitial months, I had been following them closely on their social networks, reading their press releases and gathering data about their online activity. The first

time I visited their new home, within the former slaughterhouse exchange, it was 6 November. I went there by myself to see this new space that they had occupied in June and restored throughout the summer (cf. § 4.2). The text box that follows presents the first field notes I took after I had decided to make Macao my main field of ethnographic enquiry.<sup>23</sup>

*Fieldnotes 6<sup>th</sup> November 2012*

It is around 10 pm on a Tuesday night and the main hall of Macao is almost empty. There are about 15 people around. Some play chess sitting at a small table, while at a bigger table near the bar the artists that are going to perform later are being served their meal. It is rather cold in here, and no heating seems available. I have read on their website that today's event is part of the "Exp\_Nov" series, consecrated to experimental visuals and music. A vintage stop-motion movie is projected on a mega screen in the hall, shortly after I realise it's a collection of short movies by the Canadian director and animator Norman McLaren. As I get a drink at the bar, I have the chance to listen to some conversations. The first barman acknowledges to another customer that drinks are not of the highest quality. Later he would say that he has been living and working in Macao in the last six months, that is, from the beginning. Shortly after I overhear another conversation, another bartender says she is about to move to San Francisco where her boyfriend, who she has not met in the last two and half months, currently lives. Notwithstanding the cold, she is lightly and finely dressed. She gives the impression of taking her role seriously, as in believing that doing professionally a job/task that requires interaction with a public implies conveying a good impression.

Meanwhile a musician is conducting his sound check producing dissonant sounds. As I sip my drink, I write down this sentence on my mobile phone, as I did not want to be seen taking notes in a notebook: "Art represents for Macao the professional and cultural background of its constituency and, at the same time, the economic backbone of their cultural and artistic offer". Later in the evening, I take note that I am impressed by how efficient two people are in taking the chairs from another room and orderly distributing them across the room almost automatically. In addition, my attention is attracted by the considerable amount of technical equipment for the show, and I wonder where it is coming from. I decide to visit the rest of the building. I go upstairs, in some rooms there

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<sup>23</sup> See also the fieldnotes in § 3.3 that were written when I had not yet chosen Macao as the main ethnographic field of my research.

are video installations, and I can have an overview of the space, which appears beautiful in its liberty-style decadence and harmony.

The second time I visited Macao was in early December and was for a weekend-long seminar that addressed artistic and cultural production in the “city-plant”. This was also the occasion at which Macao presented the results of a “self-inquiry”. The inquiry had been conducted by Macao during the previous months; it investigated Macao’s own constituency.<sup>24</sup> The seminar was titled “69,300 hours” where the number represents the amount of time that activists had consecrated to Macao in the first six months of its life. The seminar was a chance for me to discover not only the specificities of the analyses conducted by Macao but also the researchers that Macao was able to connect and gather. In fact, the seminar hosted a number of academics, practitioners and activists with interests ranging from economics, to art and cultural criticism. Concerning my access to the field, the seminar was an important step because it allowed me to understand what kind of approach was most suitable for my research. A friend of mine from Siena was also there and he personally knew one of the Macao founders, Emanuele. In one of the breaks, my friend introduced me to Emanuele, explaining him that I was doing a PhD about the relationship between art and political mobilization. Perhaps because of the particular moment in time, or perhaps the fatigue, since Emanuele was heavily involved in managing and moderating the seminar, his reply was short but substantial. His message was “participation is the only way in”. This was not necessarily a bad or a negative reply, but not having the chance to have a follow-up discussion resulted in a missed chance, and produced some concerns about the possibility of accessing the field.



Image 1. During Macao’s seminar, “69,300 ore”

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<sup>24</sup> [http://issuu.com/macao milano/docs/69300\\_ore](http://issuu.com/macao milano/docs/69300_ore).

In February 2013 I discussed my field access issues with a PhD colleague. I found out that she was in touch with another member of Macao, the treasurer, and she agreed to set up a meeting with her. On another cold Tuesday, I met with Chiara and Rachela, treasurer and member of the “architecture working group”, respectively. We met at 7 pm in a small family-run restaurant just in front Macao.<sup>25</sup> In this meeting, I had the chance to present, thoroughly, my project, and to communicate my intention to undertake an ethnography of Macao. The response was finally positive and welcoming. From this point onwards there was a rapid and intense acceleration into the research.

### *Getting on*

The second phase of the process of accessing the field consisted of moving towards a deeper participation in Macao’s activities. Inspired by the idea that an engaged implication in the field constitutes a way of contributing both to a deeper sociological understanding and to knowledge that is useful to movements (Mirzoeff 2013), the first step in this phase was to take part in Macao’s project relating to the “publics”. The project was presented during the seminar in early December and until that moment it had been an economic analysis of the flows taking place during the Fuorisalone – the off-event that runs parallel to the Milan Design Week. They had investigated the working conditions and the redistribution of the value created by the event across the whole supply chain. During the first assembly, while discussing this project and its eventual developments, I decided to contribute actively by proposing to integrate digital methods in order to analyze the work carried out by the thousands of people that tweet and take pictures on Instagram during the Fuorisalone. This began a deeply interesting journey, which involved so-called “tagging nights”, in which tens of people worked together to code the pictures that I, together with other fellows of the Centre For Digital Ethnography of the University of Milan<sup>26</sup>, had gathered.

The process of getting on, however, risked to turn into something ethnographically undesirable: becoming a complete participant. Following the range of ethnographic positions that the researcher can embody (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 104), I realized I had gone very rapidly from being a complete observer to what Hammersley and Atkinson define as

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<sup>25</sup> Later on I realized that this restaurant was key to some internal dynamics, since a rather homogenous group used to have their meals before the weekly assembly held every Tuesday at around 9 pm. This custom gave rise to complaints by other people regarding delays and disrespect for their own needs and the relatively limited amount of time they could allocate to Macao because of family or job-related issues. Some in Macao were suspicious of these dinners, as sort of pre-assemblies, and complained that, paradoxically, more was shared around that table than was shared in the assembly.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.etnografiadigitale.it/>.



“comparative involvement”, in which the researcher’s subjectivity and her sympathy become a reflexive part of the investigation. What happened during the summer of 2013 reminded me of this critical issue. Macao was invited to make a presentation of its global activities during a musical and cultural festival in Padua.<sup>27</sup> Since one of the main ongoing projects at that time was the one on publics, I was involved: I was asked to take part in the event by giving a short presentation on how I was deploying digital methods in this research. The festival organizers referred to me as “Alberto from the Centre for Digital Ethnography of Milan”, whereas Emanuele promptly rectified, not without a hint of amusement, that it was actually “Alberto from Macao”. As I will highlight in the final section of this chapter, I believe that Emanuele and Macao in general are completely aware of the issues and the ambiguities of positioning in the political field, including the political position in the sociological field. This surprising event reinforced the attention I gave to how I was actually negotiating my position within Macao. Together with bells that the field constantly reminds the researcher of her work, a long ethnography provides the means to understand and, most importantly, to engage in processes aimed at re-negotiating the position. From that moment onwards, I realized that, because of the projects I was following or participating in, I risked being over-identified by a part of the constituency of Macao as someone that “belonged” to a particular faction within the movement. Such a risk to be over-identified is somehow embedded in the ethnographic practice itself, to the extent that it relies on key informants. Furthermore, as I have highlighted, personal and professional connections tied me to certain activists more than others, as a result of which affinities and friendships developed beyond the research. In other words, given the greater social and professional continuity with the more “immaterial” part of the constituency of Macao, I risked neglecting other important parts of the fieldwork. To cope with and to try to avoid this risk, the extended time span I had planned to spend in the field together with a reflexive understanding in my position allowed me to cover more thoroughly the life and projects of Macao in the following months.

### **2.3 Case selection and research techniques**

The question that I often asked myself was if, and to what extent, a comparative analysis could have been beneficial for this research project. The methodological literature regarding social movements rarely considers a single-sited ethnography as a viable solution – two different options are the most widespread in the recent studies of political mobilization: the variable-based approach or the comparative case study approach. An influential contribution

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<sup>27</sup> Sherwood Festival <http://www.sherwood.it/festival>.

in this matter is della Porta's methods of social movement research. In particular, comparing the two main strategies adopted within the field – that is, small-N, case-oriented and quantitative variable-based, she states:

Focusing on a small-N, case-oriented comparison usually points at similarities and differences through dense narratives, with a large number of characteristics being taken into account, often together with their interaction within long-lasting processes. (della Porta 2008: 204)

However, I believe that in this approach, even if more keen to the close examination of the cases selected, a comparison would not have allowed me to access the fine cultural bricolage that often exists in movements. Following Melucci (1994), as conflicts promoted by movements, “raise a challenge that recasts the language and cultural codes that organize information” (Melucci 1994: 102) the deepest possible level of depth is required in order to grasp such recasting. In this sense, as highlighted by Combes (2011), there is a certain risk of methodological *routinization* in research on social movements. Combes argues how the pioneering works of Charles Tilly on the morphology of contentious action, based on longitudinal statistical studies, have inspired a quantitative research tradition that is interested in measuring the geographical or temporal variations of contentious actions. Globally, Combes argues, it is the comparative approach in itself that must be questioned. Often, comparability between movements that appear to share similar goals in different countries is taken for granted even if, at closer inspection, we can observe extreme heterogeneity under the same denomination. Furthermore, the multiplication of sites of comparison contributes to a loss in depth of analysis and in the precision of the data gathered, often dealing with variables whose specificity has been flattened in order to make them comparable. In this context, according to Combes the only way to give back life and dynamism to the study of social movements is to go back to a direct ethnographic engagement in the field.

The choice to carry out a single-sited ethnography was also due to Macao's sheer complexity. The activists themselves have acknowledged this complexity, as they also have difficulty keeping pace with the movement's constant effervescence. Following Melucci again (1996), I can try to systematize the complexity that is embodied in Macao. Contemporary movements are solidarity networks – bearers of powerful cultural meanings; they are systems of action – complex networks among the different levels of social action; for such movements collective identity is not a given, it is the outcome of exchanges, negotiations, decisions and conflicts among actors. Movements are constructed upon several layers; Melucci analytically

distinguishes these layers as being: processes of mobilization and organization, forms and models of leadership and ideologies, and forms of communication from within the action system that constitutes the collective actor. The internal side has relations with competitors, allies and adversaries and, not least, with the political system that defines the field of opportunities. It is because of such complexity, which characterizes Macao and the multiple networks in which it is embedded, that the best way to try to approach these dimensions was to limit the scope of my research to a single-sited ethnography. In addition to this ethnography, I have conducted 24 semi-structured interviews that covered the biographic dimension of the activists and their own views concerning their engagement in Macao. Most interviews were conducted at Macao between November 2013 and January 2014 at the end of the fieldwork.

So far I have adopted the formula “single-sited” when referring to my ethnography. Indeed I have studied only Macao, but if we consider the overlapping levels of which Macao is itself made, its network, the alliances, the flows that affect them, and the urban context, my research can hardly be considered as a true single-sited ethnography. In particular, one domain in itself, given its relevance for my research, has proved to be another site of ethnography entirely: that is, the digital realm. Following the reflections that have been elaborated in the anthropological field in the last two decades we understand how increasing complexity has resulted in a widespread adoption of multi-sited ethnography. Cross-cutting old dichotomies such as ‘local’ and ‘global’, the ‘lifeworld’ and the ‘system’, the “emergence of multi-sited ethnography is located within new spheres of interdisciplinary work, including media studies, science and technology studies, and cultural studies more broadly” (Marcus, 1995). In order to deal with the digital site of the Macao ethnography I have adopted a web-based approach – and more particularly, so-called digital ethnography (Caliandro, 2015). This method is mainly defined as a series of methods that are natively digital, unlike virtual-ethnography (Hine, 2000) whose methodological strategy is developed offline and only then applied to the online environment. Being grounded online implies following social media platforms, Instagram tags and Twitter re-tweets, and the structure flows of information and communication. Digital methods techniques I have deployed during my research include: co-word analysis, semantic analysis and network analysis. In particular, in my work on Macao the digital realm constituted an obvious point of entrance to the fieldwork, to the extent that it allowed me to familiarize myself with Macao’s discursive production, both in terms of text and in terms of the interactions between the Macao activists and their online publics. Later on, digital ethnography allowed me to compare and validate the findings I had elaborated via “traditional” ethnography. A relevant example in this sense is given by the context in which

Macao interacts at the digital level. The image in the following page is a graphic elaboration of the links established by the Macao Facebook page. In particular, following the “natives” the actor in this scenario is often the team or the single individual that manages the Facebook page of the group who, with his act of liking another page, establishes a link (an “edge”, in network analysis terminology), while each community, represented by its page, represents a node in the network. The data used to elaborate this graph was gathered through Netvizz, a Facebook application created by Bernhard Rieder (2013). The dataset consists of 7,000 nodes and more than 60,000 edges, displaying a gathering strategy inspired by a big-data approach. In order to produce a more broad picture, during the process of data gathering I have extended the capture process to include not only the links directly established by Macao with other pages, but also the links that these other pages directly made to Macao, and among themselves and other nodes. As my traditional ethnography progressed I started developing the hypothesis that Macao’s mobilization was more closely linked to the realm of Milanese cultural production (think tanks, startups, blogs and the makers’ scene) rather than the network of Milanese social centres. The digital analysis made it possible to manage an amount of data that would otherwise be impossible to handle. The nodes visible in the map are part of the “giant component” of the network, which is only the nodes that are part of the main cluster of the network. The visualization of the nodes, their distance from the centre (the Macao node – the biggest node in the network, because it is the node we start from) is the result of two main metrics: closeness centrality and eccentricity. The first indicates how close a node is to all the other nodes in a network, whether or not the node lies on the shortest path between other nodes, while the second captures the distance between a node and the node that is furthest from it; so a high eccentricity means that the furthest away node in the network is a long way away, and a low eccentricity means that the furthest away node is actually quite close. Looking at the graph, it is not surprising to find that Bersani (former leader of the Democratic Party, which has a center-left political orientation) is at the top of the graph, and is relatively isolated from the rest of the network. However, this is not the most relevant insight that visualizing this kind of data gave me. In the first place, the connection between Macao and the global mobilization (the yellow cluster on the left) is relatively distant, and is mediated by the Teatro Valle, a true hub in terms of digital connections within the Italian Network of Occupied Theatres, but it is also relatively more connected with global social movements (Occupy and Indignados in particular). In the second place, contaminations within the homogenous cluster reveal Macao’s peculiar interests and the degree of development of networks in that direction. On the right side of the blue cluster of Macao (that includes the wide Italian area of movements and sympathetic

media outlets for the most part) we can notice a number of light yellow nodes that manage to get “in”. These are mainly pages related to cinematographic projects linked with Macao or, more precisely, with the Video Working Group, which is one of the most active and visible working groups. However, the data show a more ethnographically interesting linkage, especially with the light blue cluster (representing the area of culture: including museums and foundations, as well as less established and more informal actors, such as blogs and media outlets that deal with culture, mainly from Spain and Italy) and the red cluster (representing a rather homogenous collection of think tanks, start-ups, maker spaces etc.). The culture cluster presents, at the bottom end, nodes that represent the most institutional actors in the cultural field in Spain, and moving toward the top of the graph, which means increasing the closeness centrality and decreasing the eccentricity, we find Italian cultural institutions, and bordering the blue cluster Italian contemporary art institutions. The relevant point here is that, in this area, one node in particular is noticeable for its size (showing a high betweenness centrality): this is Doppiozero, a cultural blog that has been extremely influential in the debate about both traditional highbrow culture (poetry, literature) and social and cultural innovation. This insight, reflected in the ethnographic insight that Macao has actually participated in a public call for funding cultural projects promoted by Doppiozero, shows, through the application of digital methods, the network of alliances and affinities of which Macao is a part.

In this kind of scenario, and increasingly in social research, digital methods represent both a stand-alone technique that can be used to pursue research in the online space, or a fundamental component of ethnography, given the inextricable link between online and offline in the life and activities of a movement and its activists.

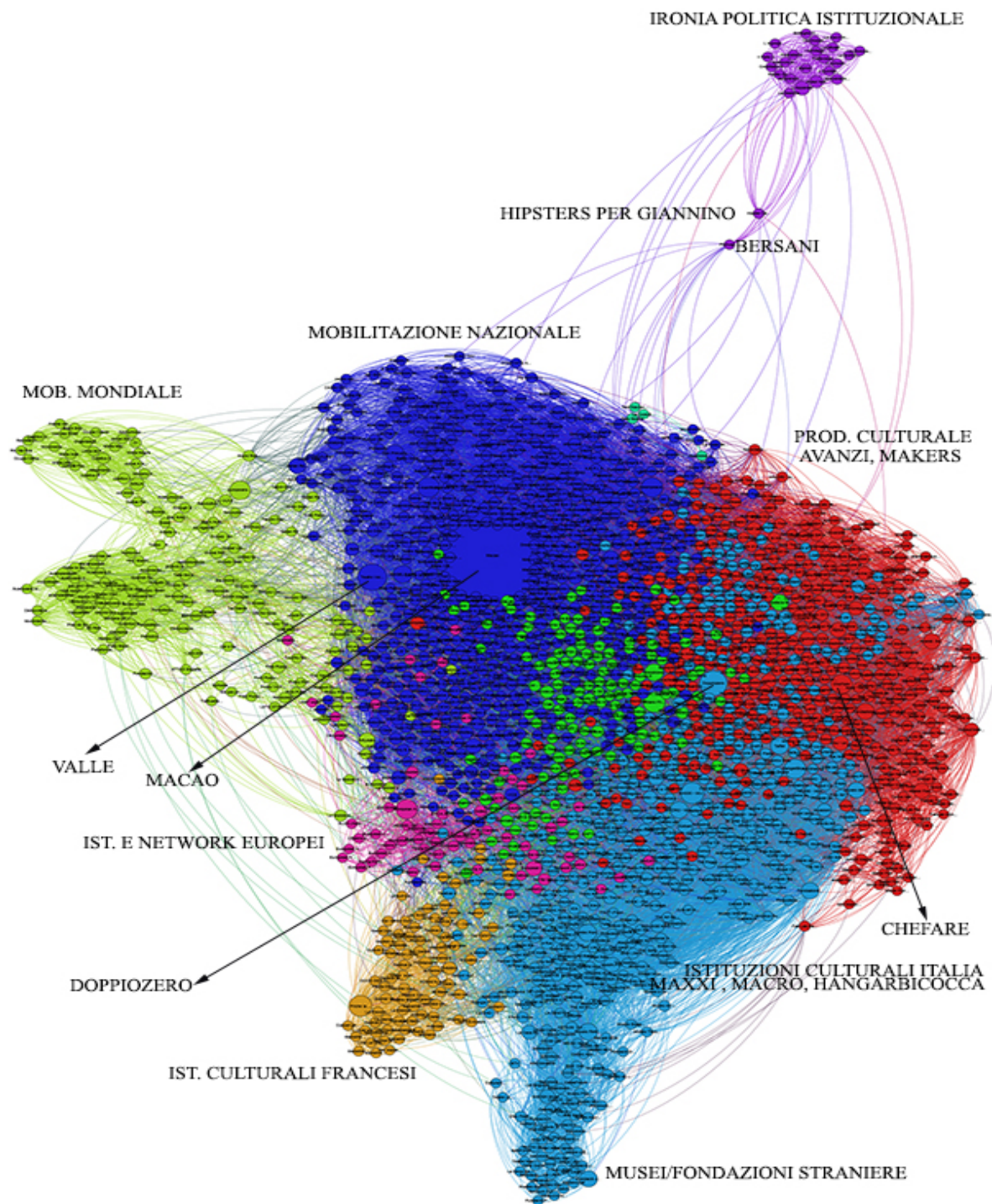


Image 2. Like-Network of Macao's Facebook Page visualized in Gephi.

## Chapter III

### Art's Own Activism

*For politics to take place, the body must appear.*

*I appear to others, and they appear to me, which means that some space between us allows each to appear.*

*My body does not act alone, when it acts politically. Indeed the action emerged from the “between”.*

*Judith Butler*

#### 3.1 Introduction

Artists are (again) at the frontlines of political mobilization, due to the peculiar social and economic situation that affects them in both a direct and indirect way. They mobilize themselves and try to aggregate fellow citizens around ideas of radical citizenship and self-governance: but they do so in their own peculiar way. The main aim of the current chapter is to investigate what happens when artists' own tools are deployed in mobilization in both physical spaces and in digitally-mediated environments. My contribution intends to complement the literature on digitally-mediated mobilizations by applying an overarching ethnographic approach. A situated and microphysical point of view is useful as it allows me to give an account of the specific role played by art in mobilization and to avoid the risk of overlooking the elemental components of action. I argue that a more thorough consideration of such components can contribute to a deeper understanding of the aesthetic, affective, cultural, political and ethical stances that are responsible for the existence and the shaping of the “stitching mechanisms” (Bennett et al., 2014) at work in large-scale digitally-mediated movements. As a result of its intense reliance on cultural, social and affective dynamics the mobilization of Macao offers a vantage point from which to both re-assess the assumptions that have guided the understanding of the recent wave of mobilizations in terms of connective action, and to update our understanding of the linkages between art and political mobilization. This chapter focuses in particular on the occupation of Torre Galfa, the event through which Macao – The New Centre for Arts, Culture and Research of Milan – was born, on 5 May 2012, and which contributed to the development of its fundamental lines of existence.

The chapter is divided into four main parts. The first tackles the issues that arise when defining what is a somewhat slippery object of analysis (the mobilization of artists), given the number of concurrent perspectives that can be used to interpret artists and their actions. The second part consists of an ethnographic narration (§ 2) regarding the road paved by Macao

activists in the Torre Galfa event (§ 3). The third part of the chapter complements and contrasts the second, by describing and analyzing the patterns of social media communication adopted before and during the occupation of the Galfa Tower (§ 4 and 5). The fourth and last part proposes the eventful logic as a pragmatic concept which can be used to explain the dynamic of the emergent wave of artistic mobilization (§ 6).

### 3.2 A magic hat in a digital world

First of all, it is important to delimitate and identify with analytical precision the object of analysis. As I have previously discussed (cf. 1.4), a fundamental task when seeking to understand art *in* mobilization concerns its framing as a “productive field”. I mean that, although performances, chants, choreographies, puppets and other creative or artistic performances have been somewhat taken into account in the scholarly literature in at least three different fields (social movement studies, sociology of arts and sociology of culture) the problem is that often (Tucker, 2012) these works, although inspiring, reveal a conceptualisation of art in mobilization which is limited (for my purposes), for two fundamental reasons: objectivation and instrumentalization.

The first problem lies in the arbitrary segmentation operated when to be analysed is only the perceivable expression of creative acts that, by definition, are the product of complex processes<sup>28</sup>. From this point of view, what are to be investigated are mostly the effects of the visible presence of a creative product on its context of reception, which is often a protest context. This leads to the second problem. As social movement scholars have explained (della Porta and Diani, 2006, Ch. 7), protest is one of the many ways in which political mobilization takes place. Marches, rallies, demonstrations and parades undoubtedly constitute some of the key arenas in which creative performances are publicly staged in an attempt to attain visibility and recognition for the movements and the causes that they advocate. Furthermore, protests have traditionally been organized by social movements or coalitions (Diani, 1992), or, according to Bennett and Castells, by crowds themselves, the most fundamental unit of which is the *activist*.

Accordingly, the main question which scholars – in particular, the few who explicitly deal with art and social movements – have posed can typically be rephrased as: how are activists using art in mobilization?<sup>29</sup> In a nutshell, the underlying assumption is that art, performances and creativity can be assimilated to a kind of “colourful magic hat” out of which activists can

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<sup>28</sup> I am not implying that such an approach is not legitimate or is flawed. Semiotics, a fundamental branch of cultural analysis, is almost entirely based on the analysis and decodification of “texts” (in a wide sense) detached from their empirical conditions of production and reception.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. § 1.4



draw innovative tactics for successful protest. Using a more formalized language, art and aesthetics constitute a sub-group of a wider repertoire of action that a given social movement is able to activate<sup>30</sup>. Of course, this perspective is still perfectly viable, and what is being questioned here is not the capacity of such a perspective to explain what has happened in the last decades or in the contemporary occurrences in which art and protest are linked instrumentally (or are understood as such). In empirical terms, this is the case when a non-professionally artistic activist uses their creativity in protest or co-opts professional artists for the production of protest artefacts.<sup>31</sup>

For me [...] the Pink and Silver was tactical frivolity [...] so you are using frivolousness [...] tactically in a situation where everyone is geared up for confrontation.<sup>32</sup>

Looking back at the late 1990s, the interviewed activist sees frivolousness as a tactic to be deployed in effective protesting, for example to draw police attention to herself and to divert it from something going on elsewhere. However, such an approach shows its limits when the only people involved are artists themselves, mobilizing on their own.

Art and politics, the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics, politicized artists and avant-gardes have both produced, and have themselves been, widely-debated topics in Western thought. Of course, it is not just in speculation that the two realms have crossed paths. As Mathieu Gregoire (2013) highlights in his recent book, the *Intermittents du Spectacle*, a specific category of French art workers<sup>33</sup>, have engaged for the whole last century in a struggle for their rights. From these premises, to conclude that there is nothing new in artists' mobilizations would be equally wrong. In fact, Gregoire's main argument is that, starting from reasons and desires that appear consistent throughout the century, art workers have

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<sup>30</sup> Here we intend a repertoire of action as a set of practices that are potentially infinite and empirically impossible to enumerate, and that are activated according to the specific circumstances that movements both face and contribute to co-creating. On this cf. Mattoni's elaboration of the notion proposed by Charles Tilly (Mattoni, 2012).

<sup>31</sup> The issue is that creativity in protest often originates from subjects relatively deprived under certain capitals while in my case study I am analyzing highly trained artists with a high cultural capital. The question is relative to social position and professionalization, so, in the first case we would have a popular uprising in which creativity is a tool to use to attain more visibility, while in the second it is a disguised set of practices and sensibilities.

<sup>32</sup> Reclaim the Streets Activist (Pink & Silver Brigades) Interview, within *Tactical Frivolity*, documentary by Marcelo Exposito (2007).

<sup>33</sup> A distinction is usually made between visual artists, performers, and artists, as commonly understood, and workers, the "maestranze" who are involved in the material aspects of arts. This division of labour which is also evident in contemporary art (artists produce ideas and artisans who specialize in metal or wood, craft artists' abstract ideas). This aspect is recognized by Macao's activists and is tackled through specific ideas and techniques that will be discussed more widely in chapter 4.

constructed distinct emancipatory horizons<sup>34</sup> over time. What is revealing is that through these different lenses it is possible to reconstruct the underlying logic of the global social conflict in a given context. In order to better frame the context in which Macao's mobilization is part of, we now must take into account the prominent role that digital media have come to play.

The diffusion of information and communication technology (ICT) has attracted growing attention within the interdisciplinary field of contentious politics (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007). Contributions in this field have stressed if, and to what extent, ICT has reshaped modes and practices of political mobilization. In particular, along with the technological developments “questions whether organizations still have a role in grassroots mobilization, whether dense face-to-face community networks are still necessary to support collective action, whether identity bonds still need some kind of shared direct experience and/or ‘real’ interaction to develop” (della Porta and Diani, 2006, p. 132) started to emerge after the 1990s. From the outset, the social movement debate seems to frame the articulation of media and mobilization by privileging an organizational point of view.

More recently, uprisings in North Africa (the Arab Spring), in Spain (Indignados) and in the U.S. (Occupy Wall Street, which then globally spread as a “protest brand”) have renewed the debate on the role of social media in the organization, recruitment and life of these mobilizations. In this context, Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2013) propose a typology that differentiates between movements based on a more traditional collective logic from the emerging connective logic in which the digital media are the organizing agents. Dealing with the same wave of mobilization, Manuel Castells (2012) identifies a fundamental common feature among them: their being inextricably linked to the creation of autonomous communication networks, supported by the Internet, and, in particular, by wireless services. This feature separates them from previous experiences, so that they are not just social movements anymore: they are networked social movements.<sup>35</sup>

Within this overarching framework, what I propose in this chapter is that through the lens of the case study of Macao it is possible to shed some light on what is, perceivably, an emerging mobilization logic: a logic that I define, in an attempt to bridge the fields of contentious politics, digital media research and cultural sociology, as an *eventful logic*.

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<sup>34</sup> For Grégoire such emancipatory horizons represent an array of demands imagined and developed collectively by social actors, whose ambition is to escape subordination and promote institutions that consider capable of advancing their collective conditions.

<sup>35</sup> Problems have been identified concerning the efficacy of such a conceptualization given that social movements in their many different shapes are always, first and foremost, a network. Mario Diani, oral presentation, EUI Summer School on Political Mobilization, September 2013.

## 2. Strolling to the skyscraper

Macao appears to the city of Milan with the liberation of Galfa Tower, an excellent piece of post-war modern architecture and a symbol of financial speculation within the Milanese territory, abandoned and “frozen” for more than a decade in the real estate portfolio of the Ligresti family. Working groups, research groups and experimental groups, focusing on the different languages of contemporary arts, were born here. Now they operate in the former, and disused, Exchange of the municipal slaughterhouse situated in Viale Molise 68, a perfect example of Liberty in Milano, in a densely populated neighbourhood hosting a number of different cultures, working conditions and incomes. Practices and reflections are here open to contributions from all people, and they mark a radical model of active citizenship that finds its expression in the working groups, the assemblies, in the care of the space, in the production of art and culture. These practices and reflections are embodied in Macao’s relations with social centres, neighbourhood associations and individual citizens, but also with research and cultural institutions, from museums to universities to create seminars, projects and co-productions. A free use and diffusion of culture, independent co-production under Creative Commons, the research into and the experimentation with new economies, the sharing of space and equipment and cultural dialogue constitute some of the branches of Macao’s current research and practices.

This description of itself was written by Macao<sup>36</sup> in September 2014 and was enclosed in a press kit that was used to support a fundraising campaign,<sup>37</sup> the first since its establishment in 2012. It helps to understand what Macao now is, and what its main lines of research are. However, we need to take a step backwards and see how Macao has reached this point. Macao, as an idea, was born in a room several months before the occupation of a skyscraper. It was the winter between 2011 and 2012, and the group of five people who were sitting in that room were what was left of a wider group called *Lavoratori dell’Arte* (art workers – LdA in the text hereafter).

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<sup>36</sup> It is important to underscore that I have translated this from Italian and I was paid a remuneration for it. This is the result of the peculiar ethnographic relation established by me and Macao (cf. chapter 2) and of their ongoing work on the economic implications of their mobilization (cf. Chapter 5).

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/macao-meets-workcenter-of-j-grotowski-t-richards>

This group was explicitly formed in the summer of 2011, after some of their members got in touch with the first occupations started in Rome in June 2011 – Teatro Valle was occupied on June 14, exactly one day after the historical victory in the referendum on “water as common good”, against the privatization of public water.<sup>38</sup> When they returned in Milan, these members started organizing assemblies, which soon started to gather a wider public, including knowledge workers and “material” workers who had been laid-off. Already, at this early stage, two elements were visible that help delineate the ideas of the future founders of Macao: in the first place, they disagreed with what they deemed was the dominant attitude in those assemblies – a framing of precariousness in terms of self-pity, which consisted of an individualist sharing of negative experiences, in terms of both jobs and life quality. In the second place, and consequently, the LdA felt an urge to take proactive and radical action. To understand what kind of action they had in mind, it is necessary to take a further step back. In 2010, the informal group who later founded the LdA realized that they had a common “disease” and they were “incompatible with the visual arts’ working system” (MI 2), which they saw as based on exploitation and devoid of any kind of formal protection for artists vis-à-vis the institutional art system. Their idea was, therefore, to develop an Italian version of a set of formalized contracts to protect artists that had been created in Germany by a group of artists and lawyers. This effort of legal translation within the framework of Italian law proved fruitful in theory, but less so in practice. Such contracts were adopted by no-one, showing the Italian art system to be impervious to a change in this direction.<sup>39</sup> This anecdote shows the radically different situation faced by Italian artists, compared to their colleagues in France, the *Intermittents*. The field of Italian art workers was fragmented, isolated and without the support of the traditional transmission belts: unions and parties. It is from this context that a new “horizon of emancipation” derived its defining features: a shift from a policy-oriented struggle to a more encompassing political struggle.<sup>40</sup>

A rupture within LdA took place when the artistic “wing” of the group – the other wing being mainly curatorial – decided to symbolically occupy, for a day, the contemporary art museum in Milan, Padiglione d’Arte Contemporanea (PAC), which was hosting an exhibition by Pixar, the American animation giant.<sup>41</sup> The main reason for this rupture lay in the different points of view held by the two main components regarding what precise form practices of

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. 1.3

<sup>39</sup> This is a delicate matter, because in one of the interviews (MI 2) it became clear how some of the people involved in the former LdA group experienced economic pressure, which was brought to bear to encourage them to stop their critical activity.

<sup>40</sup> According to Marco Baravalle, one of the founders of S.A.L.E. docks of Venice, a node of the Italian Network of Occupied Theaters, it took a decade-long effort to “to open up their causes to wider categories of workers.

<sup>41</sup> Link to occupation + eventually picture.

social change should take. In the words of an LdA member, later a founder of Macao (MI 3):

Radicalism is not a thought, it is first and foremost a practice. If you limit yourself to the level of thought, you are confined within the aestheticization of the struggle [...] we had a compelling desire to get rid of the concept of participation and listening. Later on we cared but in that moment we did not.

These ideas resonate with the situationist heritage that constituted an indirect predecessor of this emerging mobilization<sup>42</sup> and they are also relevant to an assessment of the fundamental lines of development of Macao's mobilization. After this split, the five remaining art workers "closed themselves in a room for a month" (MI 2) and, eventually, came up with an idea: to occupy the Galfa Tower. Together with the idea of an occupation, a campaign to anticipate it was carefully planned, involving both social media and the urban space of Milan. The data and the success of this campaign will be evaluated in its digital terms in the following paragraphs. What is important to underline here is the role of the detailed planning that was behind the Galfa Tower *event*, and, secondly, the coupling of physical and digital dimensions. The path that led to the Galfa Tower occupation involved a number of different elements. In the first instance, assemblies were called in the various social spaces in Milan, which gathered hundreds of people,<sup>43</sup> in particular in the months of March and April 2012. Secondly, a video campaign on YouTube was launched on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April, playing with the idea of April's fool's day. The campaign lasted until the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, when the occupation took place, and it consisted of 27 clips that can be grouped into two main genres: political jamming and political manifesto. The political jamming videos subvert the commercial imagery of the 1980s,<sup>44</sup> while in the political manifesto Macao hosts eminent figures in the cultural world, including the Nobel prize-winner Dario Fo and theorists Franco Berardi and Antonio Caronia. These figures stressed how important Macao is and how it is needed in the city. Interestingly enough, although Macao did not officially exist yet, these figures spoke of Macao as if it was already there, acting in the world. This allows us to trace another coupling in the ontological aspects of the notion of event: that is, its being taken in between the actual happening and its performative/discursive creation. In other words, the question might be:

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<sup>42</sup> I refer in particular to the numerous ruptures produced by Guy Debord within the Situationist International in which the desire for purity in his pursue was secondary to a wider inclusion. Cf. Perniola (1998).

<sup>43</sup> According different interviews participants numbered from 50 to 70, to a 100 (cf. MI 1, MI 5, MI 9, MI, 3).

<sup>44</sup> The first video on YouTube shows a sketch of an Italian television programme that was very popular during the 1980s, *Indietro Tutta*. The video referred to an imaginary commercial sponsor, called "cacao meraviglioso", a wonderful and exceptional type of cocoa available in various versions the names of which were a parody of Brazilian words (*delicacao*, *spregiudicao* and *depressao*). In this first video, Macao changes the initial letter from "c" to "m" and recalls the fictional advertising of this imaginary product.

under which circumstances does an event come into existence in its full power? This issue will be discussed in the closing section of the chapter.

Thirdly, after the launch of the campaign on YouTube, a wheeled video box<sup>45</sup> appeared in the streets and the main squares of Milan. Through it, Macao activists “surveyed” the population, asking them what their needs and desires were as regarded Macao, the nascent Centre for Arts, Culture and Research of Milan. In a similar attempt, the activists made an open call (Bando) to the Milanese population through their newly constructed website (based on tumblr), through which they invited people to provide their own interpretation of the acronym of M.A.C.A.O and to attach to it a proposal for a seminar, an event, or a project to be held in Macao. Furthermore, with the notable exception of Facebook,<sup>46</sup> all main social network profiles were established from the 1<sup>st</sup> of April: Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. These profiles displayed a coherent palette of colours and a specifically designed logo. In the profiles art and knowledge workers visibly employed their skills in the making of Macao. This shows how, from the beginning Macao was constituted as a brand, not just in its being a recognizable icon but to the extent that it served as a device through which communication, effects and values were conveyed and negotiated (Arvidsson, 2006). Finally, the main call for action – the occupation on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May – consisted in a communication diffused through a relatively old tool: a mailing list. Two main factors explain the use of a mailing list. The first is related to the heritage of previous mobilization cultures shared among the enlarged group that, immediately before the occupation, also included members connected with the Milanese milieu of *social centres*. The second reveals both the awareness of the limits, in terms of privacy and security, of the main commercial social media platforms and the availability of independently managed servers or email servers provided by counter-cultural organizations.<sup>47</sup>

### 3.4 The Galfa event

We need to underline that we are aware that we are inside, that we are not anymore the decorators of the imaginary, as artists have been for a long time, we are inside a mechanism of valorization, a mechanism of production of imaginary.

(Antonio Caronia during the press conference at Macao, 5<sup>th</sup> of May)

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<sup>45</sup> Link YouTube videobox

<sup>46</sup> Until the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 2012, three days after the occupation, the main reference account for LdA was their Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/lavoratoridellarte>.

<sup>47</sup> I refer to the Autistici/Inventati group. In their manifesto they write: “Our aim is to reclaim spaces on the Internet where we can discuss and work on two levels: on the one hand, the right to and need for free communication, privacy, anonymity and access to digital resources; on the other, social projects linked to reality and struggles” <http://www.autistici.org/en/who/manifesto.html> [accessed 12/10/2014]

The call for the meeting to occupy the Galfa Tower was for the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, at 11am, in Piazzale Lagosta, a market square in the Isola neighbourhood. The square is at walking distance and undoubtedly constitutes a convenient spot from where to start, but, as I have highlighted in the first chapter, Isola represents a highly symbolic space for Milan because of its history of resistance to gentrification and for hosting the Isola Art Centre, where the founders of Macao had previous experiences of artistic activism. Once the gathering was completed they started moving. However, it was not a demonstration, nor was it a parade: there were no banners, no slogans were sung and no colourful displays were shown. It was, rather, a calm and determined walk toward a precise target with a similarly precise intention: “we open Macao in order to let culture recapture a piece of Milan”.<sup>48</sup>

Among the hundreds of citizens who took part in the walk activists of the local antagonistic social centres scene were also present, as well as activists belonging to other nodes of the National Network of Occupied Theatres. Beyond them, the people who populated the LdA assemblies in the previous months were present and, most importantly, mainstream media were also invited to join and were filming when the activists broke into the Galfa Tower. During the press conference, which took place shortly after, at least two national television networks (Sky and La7) and two national newspapers covered the event. According to an interview with an activist, contacts with media had been established in the previous symbolic occupation of the Milanese contemporary art museum. This fact shows how, in the planning of the occupation itself, a slot for the media is already foregone: media were embedded by Macao in their own narration, they were a part of the plot of the event.

In a matter of days thousands of people visited Macao, and hundreds joined the working groups to carry out video editing, communication, press office, and gardening, and to start their own projects.<sup>49</sup> The neighbours gave them plants while architects and engineers used their expertise to secure and make the space safe for its dwellers. Artists, designers and performers both participated and at the same time envisaged the Galfa Tower as a free space in which they might find a common place where they could work and create together. Daily life was disrupted: a conspicuous number of people took leave from their jobs in order to participate in the process of becoming Macao. In this process, identities were shaped. Through the experience of collaborative work new alliances were built and decisions were taken in assemblies in which there was widespread participation. In a word, solidarity emerged, and this will be the true key for the future existence of Macao, a pillar in its relations

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<sup>48</sup> [www.macaomilano.org/comunicato\\_galfa.htm](http://www.macaomilano.org/comunicato_galfa.htm) [accessed 12/10/2014]

<sup>49</sup> It is important to underline how the planning of the event also involved, from the beginning, the existence of an already fixed number of working groups in key areas that were vital to the development of Macao.

and a sound background for its production. These themes will be explored in the following chapter.

A plausible hypothesis for this success lies in the symbolic value of the action itself, in the bold gamble implied by the choice of occupying a 33-storey building, in the exertion of a critique of the neoliberal city and providing, at the same time, a believable way out. Coming back for a moment to the open call (Bando) that LdA had publicized on the Macao website from the 1<sup>st</sup> of April, it was only after the first days of occupation that applications begin to populate their database.<sup>50</sup> Within the month of May they received 136 applications, for projects ranging from visual arts projects, installations, performances, live concerts, to seminars etc. The striking thing about these applications is that when applying, using a google form, applicants had to specify if their project was a single one-time event, or if its duration was up to a week, a month, or permanent. Of the grand total of 236 applications received – 90% of which were in May and June 2012 – only 160 specified a duration and, among them, 109 stated that their contribution was to be intended as permanent. This finding is telling, as it shows the needs and the desires that moved the applicants to apply, and the temporal horizon in which they were investing: not a single contribution, but to be an active part in the process of becoming Macao.

Within the main event of occupying a skyscraper, events of a different nature took place. A number of leading figures in both the political, cultural and artistic world visited Macao and publicly attested their full support to the cause, providing additional visibility. Some of these visits were live (and free) performances, resulting in a massive attraction of the public. Such an ambivalence, between an event rooted in a political stance, and the event subsumed in the “economy of the event”, represents an ambiguity that deeply permeates the activity of Macao. This will be addressed in the concluding paragraph and, more extensively in Chapter 5, which discusses the economic model of Macao.

However, the complex mix that I have attempted to describe in these pages was also permeated by a diffuse aesthetic component, as I have noted in my field notes that are here elaborated in a more accessible way.

#### **Notes from the fieldwork: The Vertical Walks**

Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> May. I decide to spend my afternoon in Macao. The schedule of daily cultural activities proposed by Macao to the citizens is dense. Starting from 3pm it is possible to make vertical walks up to the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor, at 5pm on the seventh floor there is a reading of

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<sup>50</sup> <http://bando.macao.mi.it/archive>



the sixth chapter of *La vita Agra*, a book by Luciano Bianciardi who, in 1959, sets his story in this very building, Torre Galfa, which then was the headquarters of a mining company that caused a disaster, involving dozens of casualties, in a rural area of Tuscany, the area where the author came from before moving to Milan to work in the cultural industry. At 6pm a theatrical performance on the first floor, and finally at 7pm the general assembly on the ground floor. Meanwhile the thematic roundtables keep working hard: photographers talk about the creation of a shared archive for their shots; the architecture/self-building group checks their own resources, sketching an organization chart which occupies an entire wall. The gardening group plants flowers and vegetables which neighbours have given to Macao for the creation of an urban garden. I'm impressed by their organization: communication is efficient, everybody knows everything, information circulates, total openness, hierarchies are subverted by insiders and outsiders. I sign the appeal in favour of Macao (prepared by the famous jurist Ugo Mattei) and I go to the gathering point for the vertical walk. It's 4.30pm, we huddle around the guide (a Macao activist) who, before starting, tells us the story of the building. Initially the headquarters for a mining company and an oil company, the building at a later stage hosted a bank (Banca Popolare di Milano). Unused for 15 years, the tower, owned by Ligresti Group and founded by one of the most discussed Italian lobbyists, was chosen by Macao as space, a container, and symbolic vector for the New Centre for Arts, Culture and Research of Milan. Here are some reflections of my experience at the heart of the former business centre of Milan (Centro Direzionale) about the role of the artistic/aesthetical sensibility in the Macao project.

The vertical walk allows one to *feel* in one's own body and legs the path of social ascent. Through the continuity of steps, one after the other, opposed to the discontinuity of the elevator, it is possible to connect the up and down, the manager of the top floors with the receptionist at the first, passing through the white collars in the womb of the building. Macao offers a new point of view both in a metaphorical and in a terribly real way. If I think of the places and the heights of my everyday life I realize that I often move underground, I work and study in a library at the first floor and I only go to the third to visit the offices of my supervisors. In Paris I happen more often to live in the high floors, but this is no contradiction: in bourgeois buildings the *bonnes à tout faire*, the domestics or the intellectuals who cannot afford any better housing, live on the top floor. In those floors now live students and young couples. It's interesting to note how most of the times we have to pay to see a city from above, and usually we are disposed to do that when we are in an elsewhere which sets us as tourists, and seldom if ever do we do so in the town where

we live. The experience planned and offered by Macao is radically new: providing a critical platform to the Milanese citizenry, calling them to see with their own eyes the city they live in from a different and innovative perspective, not veiled by tourist amusement. In a certain sense they integrate the territorial knowledge of the city that each one of us possesses – a detailed, deep, living knowledge – with the top-down point of view of the establishment: rough, rational, impersonal.

The lived experience that informs this page gives an account of how the “artistic sensibility” was embodied in the planning and thinking of the experiential activity they proposed and, more generally, in the overall experience of Galfa Tower. Moreover, such initiatives were meant to produce an *aesthesis* in the participants, a common shared perception. These notes, which also appeared in a different form as a report on a blog,<sup>51</sup> attest to an individualized and subjective perception and probably, sociologically speaking, they lack a certain distance and objectivation: a euphoria that, in those days, was shared by thousands of people through social media.

### 3.5 Media practices

This section of this chapter explores the digital presence of Macao, first presenting and interpreting the quantitative data gathered during the research and then tracing a typology of practices that Macao has implemented in its social media activity.

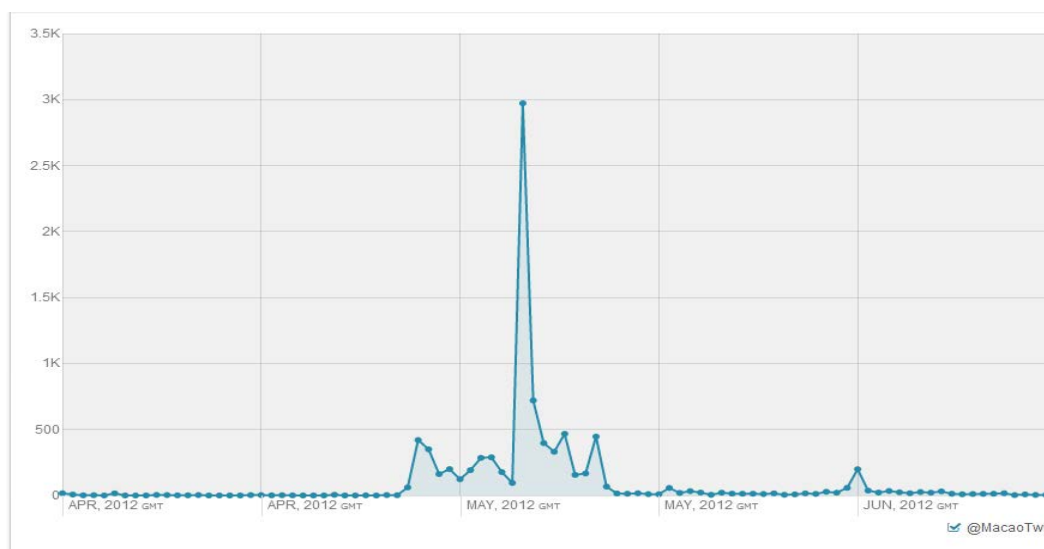
Macao’s presence on social media is highly diversified and includes Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. 53,000 people follow its Facebook fan page. To provide a wider frame, the Occupied Valle Theatre of Rome has 84,000, while the Nuovo Cinema Palazzo has 13,000 followers. Smaller nodes in the network include the Teatro Pinelli Occupato – Messina or the Ex-Asilo of Naples, with 9,400 and 1,700 followers, respectively. Macao’s fan page was created on Facebook on the 8th of May 2012, three days after the Galfa Tower occupation. Since then it has *capitalized* on the urban and media effervescence that had previously coalesced around Macao. The total number of users who view at least one of the contents published by Macao on Facebook grew from 102,840 on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May to 490,000 viewers on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May. This constituted the peak of visibility and coincided with Macao’s eviction from the tower. From that moment onwards it decreased to 89,000 during the post-eviction of Palazzo Citterio and finally it stabilized at a daily average of 30,000 in the following months.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> [www.lavoroculturale.org](http://www.lavoroculturale.org)

<sup>52</sup> Source: Official insights from Macao’s Fan Page on Facebook, access to which was generously granted.

A Twitter profile was created on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2012, and this has around 12,000 followers and 8,000 tweets, with an average of seven tweets per day. Even if internal data concerning the Twitter audience are not available, thanks to external databases<sup>53</sup> it is possible to state that the buzz around Macao during its first phase of intense mobilization followed the same dynamics that characterized the Facebook page. Be that as it may, as the Twitter profile was active from early April, the time of Macao's launch campaign, it is fair to interrogate if and to what extent tweets actually supported the digital aggregation of Macao's constituency. As is visible in the graphic (cf. Graphic 1), during April daily tweets – from and about Macao – range between two and 15: a number that is insufficient to explain the following explosion. Deepening the analysis of these tweets, during April the profile activity was limited to an interaction with the other nodes of the network of theatres and Macao was not capable of attracting, at least digitally, a wider audience. Furthermore, even if we consider the relative peak, around 80 tweets, the day before the Galfa Tower was occupied – when the idea that Milan would soon have an “artistic” occupation was quickly spreading in the offline world – it appears substantially less intense compared to the 3,000 tweets (produced by or directed to Macao) that constitutes the absolute peak during the day of eviction from the Tower.<sup>54</sup>



Graphic 1. Total of tweets created by Macao or directed to Macao (from 1/4/2012 to 30/6/2012)

Concerning the YouTube channel: this comprises 113 videos that have gathered 180,000 views and 671 subscribers. As I have mentioned already, it is this platform that hosted Macao's launching campaign. Starting on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April and concluding on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May

<sup>53</sup> Source: data gathered from Topsy ([www.topsy.com](http://www.topsy.com))

<sup>54</sup> If we consider all the hashtags related to Macao on those days (#macao, #tuttisumacao, #iostoonmacao, #torregalfa), we can count a grand total of almost 20,000 tweets published during the 15<sup>th</sup> of May.

produced 27 videos. Each of them has a number of views that ranges from 241 to a maximum of 6673,<sup>55</sup> an average of 1868 views per video. Finally, if we consider the 50,000 views gathered across the whole campaign, it seems plausible that a viral propagation of Macao's message took place on YouTube. What must be taken into account in this case is that only 10% of views<sup>56</sup> are accountable for in the pre-occupation phase, proving that the Galfa event induced sympathizers, media professionals or fellow citizens to inform themselves retrospectively about what Macao was about and how it became possible.

Leaving for now the quantitative data, we can present the practices identified in Macao's social media strategy. One point of reference, in this endeavour, is the concept of *media practices* elaborated by Nick Couldry (2012), which makes it possible to identify "what people do with media in the context in which they act" (Couldry, 2012: 35). Following this conceptualization, media practices are: those practices addressed specifically to media; that involve media but that do not make of them their primary object; practices that in order to fully develop rely on a pre-existing media system or on a specific way of functioning of such a system. Practices are always about regularities: that is, regularities of action; they are a social product and, as such, they embody a shared knowledge, power relations and constraints on action. Based on semi-structured interviews and digital ethnography (Rogers, 2013), Macao's social media activity can be pinned down to four distinct media practices:

- a) Information
- b) Announcement
- c) Dissemination of imagery
- d) Strategic incursions into the media

Information practices refer to the regular and daily diffusion on social media, and particularly on Twitter, of a certain number of news from independent media outlets on themes selected as having an affinity to Macao's identity (e.g. the extensive coverage granted to Gezi Park events in May 2013). The second category includes communications that concern the diffusion of news regarding events organized by Macao or "service announcements" during mobilization phases. This kind of activity is performed especially through Facebook. The dissemination of imagery aims to evoke rather than inform, creating expectations and transmitting an aesthetic mood. An example is provided by the campaign that preceded the blitz-occupation of the "Maestoso" Cinema, set up in order to celebrate Macao's first birthday on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2013. A visual campaign that attempted to arouse interest by foreshadowing the imminent event proving no explanation at all on its concretization in the

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<sup>55</sup> Views updated to 20th August 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Source: elaboration of public data available on Macao's YouTube channel.

urban space. In this manner, media practices were deployed online, with the aim of producing effects offline. Lastly, strategic incursions that focused directly on the media with the goal of disrupt the symbolic order in the media ecosystem showed a strong affinity with the situationist *détournement*. A concrete example of this kind of practice was the complex subvertising campaign elaborated to critique the “big event” of Milano’s design week held annually in April, complemented by its “off” side, the “Fuorisalone”, which nowadays has become more influential than the former.

To conclude, Macao’s social media use appears to have been inspired by a vertical approach (Kavada, 2013) and represents a strategic tool in which both the Macao activists’ decision-making processes and their organization culture are not openly involved. For Macao, social media are not spaces in which things “really” happen – they are, rather, vehicles for making things happen in the real urban space. Returning to the question that implicitly guided the first part of this paragraph: how can we account for the aggregation around, and in, Macao? Through the quantitative analysis, it was possible to ascertain how social media did not play a fundamental role. It is plausible to hypothesize that a role was played by pre-existing networks – both online and offline – to which Macao activists had access. It remains to clarify in what way the theories available in the connective logic paradigm can help us understand the deployment of Macao.

### **3.6 The explanatory power of connective logic**

At first glance, the intersection between digital media and Macao's wave of mobilization appears to be easily readable through the lens of the "logic of connective action" introduced by Bennett and Segerberg (2013) to describe a kind of contentious action characterized by personal action frames and self-organized networks. The two authors suggest that the most recent cycle of protest by Indignados and Occupy has been nurtured by a "connection without organization", where the structural lack of an organizational scaffold has been balanced by an efficient capitalization of the "private politics" of social networking platforms (Papacharissi, 2010). Both the thriving presence on social media and the organizational autonomy that distinguishes Macao from most established and traditional protest movements suggest a substantial closeness to the ideal type of connective action. However, a deeper ethnographic analysis shows a global picture that is more puzzling and contradictory than expected.

Macao springs out by an open and inclusive frame of action that replaces specific belongings and strict ideological identification with the fluid openness of human encounters and cooperative planning. However, this structural autonomy from any pre-existent organization

does not lead to the “personal action frame” that Bennett and Segerberg have found in Occupy protests and that are explained in the light of multifaceted individualization (Ivi, p. 744). On the contrary, Macao is constantly displayed in the form of a plural subjectivity: anchored to the “us” of the founding members and projected into the forthcoming “common constituent field” where idiosyncratic experience will be valued and subsumed in a more general project. Moreover, Macao’s social media practices date to the days after the occupation of Torre Galfa: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube profiles were not very popular during the preparatory stage and the first days of mobilization (and were even absent, as was discussed in section 4).

Thus, the role of digital media in Macao cannot be traced at the organizational level nor at the symbolic one, at least in the terms identified by Bennett and Segerberg. The constant attempt at building a collective action frame marks a considerable distance with the spreading individualization of politics embodied by those platforms. The logic of connective action seems not to offer an adequate paradigm by which to understand the richness of communication practices in the deployment of Macao’s contentious action. Even if we turn to other analytical models, however, the picture does not become clearer and less ambiguous. For instance, the symmetrical correspondence between Internet cultures and strategic/organizing/decision-making cultures identified by Kavada (2013) does not seem to apply to Macao, where “vertical” communication cultures (managed mainly by professionals, hierarchical and event-driven) co-exist with inward-oriented and participatory decision-making cultures (Ivi, p. 40). During Macao’s weekly assemblies, the efficiency of decision-making processes never got the upper hand on the active involvement of all participants and the full valorization of all participants’ expressive contributions. On the contrary, the high level of professionalization in the management of Macao’s communication resources, together with the main usage of the website as a showcase of events rather than as a platform for decisions reveals a prevailing vertical and broadcasting communication culture.

My hypothesis is that the eccentricity of Macao in relation to some of the most far-reaching and comprehensive analytical models available in the recent literature is not only evidence of the quirky peculiarity of the case study. More deeply, it points to the need to go beyond the surface of a kind of media usage that seems to be transversally shared by heterogeneous social movements, independently from their specific cultural features and political aims. Away from this apparently common surface, a striking heterogeneity of motivations, symbolic meanings and functional appropriation shows that the roles played by digital media in collective action are as many as the number of cultures that use them. It is undoubtedly true that digital technologies, and especially social networking sites, can make mobilization

and recruitment more efficient insofar as they potentiate the symbolic value of messages through personalized framing and enhance the rapidity of dissemination through networks that, without being political in nature, reproduce and pluralize the life-worlds of people. However, the way in which this potential is effectively translated into practice does not necessarily coincide with a strong emphasis on individualization and a full replacement of organizational structure by technology-enabled networks of personalized communication. The translation of technology into socio-technical framework of usage is always the dynamic outcome of a contingent negotiation between affordances (Hutchby, 2001) and the socio-cultural contexts in which they are appropriated. As Kavada (2013, p. 77) shows, cultures of communication which determine the way in which some kinds of usage are actualized and others are ignored, do not develop in a vacuum; rather they are holistically connected to the system of beliefs, values and assumptions that shape the organizations, strategies and decisions of social movements. Yet, the continuum vertical-horizontal used by Kavada to articulate a typology of Internet cultures does not cover the broad spectrum of possible convergences between the different layers of cultures that constitute a social movement. This typology appears to be too much affected by the access-interaction-participation paradigm (Carpentier, 2011) that has informed both the practices and the reflections on the political potentialities of digital media. If the issue of participation continues to be intrinsically pertinent to all analysis of political processes, one should not take for granted that it still could represent the only discriminating factor for the assessment of digital media usage within the mobilization process of social movements. This is emblematically shown by the case of Macao: notwithstanding the great emphasis put on the experimentation of new participatory decision-making processes and the great value given to the personal experience of all activists, neither the website nor the social media profiles have been considered by activists as platforms in which to deploy these participatory dynamics. The multifaceted complexity of the interdependence between technology and culture within social movements suggests a need to abandon paradigmatic frameworks in favour of pragmatic analytical models that are enough open to be able to grasp, for each case, the cultural specificity of the technological appropriation that is at stake.

I propose to interpret the role that digital-networked communication practices play in the mobilization process through the concept of “idioculture” (Fine, 1979), “a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group” (Fine, 1979, p. 734). Although coming from a different disciplinary field, the notion of idioculture could be useful in contextualizing communication practices within the broader

picture of the beliefs, values, symbols that shape the broader character and practice of a movement.

First of all, the concept of idioculture is founded on the starting assumption of cultural differentiation. Even against a background of common goals, comparable memberships and similar environments, each group develops unique cultures and different styles of behaviour. This uniqueness arises due to the fact that all environmental contingencies are always mediated by the peculiar and idiosyncratic social definitions that emerge in group interaction. Idiocultures are the outcome of the very fabric of social interaction through which a group continuously engages itself “in the construction of a social reality, a history (McBride, 1975), and a sense of meaning (Berger and Luckmann, 1967) (Ivi, p. 737). This emphasis on cultural differentiation resonates with the main argument of *The Social Shaping of Technology* (Mackenzie and Wajcman, 1985), according to which technologies do not exist in their indisputable materiality but only in the plural cultural forms through which their materiality becomes meaningful for specific groups of adopters.

Secondly, the concept of idioculture was originally applied by Fine to the study of baseball teams in the USA, insofar as such teams combine the two major elements of group life: task orientation (winning games) and socioemotional orientation (peer friendship). The extension to the field of social movements, and more specifically to the communication practices that mediate their contentious action, requires a further refinement of the concept. In fact, social movements are a specific kind of social group that are “defined by actions that take the form of a visible performance” (Dayan, 2005, p. 52). A social movement is thus a “public” in the sense that has been detailed by Dayan (2005): a social group that requires another public that watches it perform. A public cannot be invisible, it “must ‘go public’ or it is not a public” (Ivi, p. 52). Consequently, the elements of the social movement's idioculture I am looking for must necessarily include a performative dimension, through which the group achieves its task of entering into dialogue with, and actively intervening in, the surrounding society.

### **3.7 The eventful logic**

Based on an analysis of the long cycle of protest for global justice that symbolically started with the Battle of Seattle against the World Trade Organization (WTO), della Porta (2009) proposes that we consider mobilization and demonstration not just as an effect of a given political opportunity structure and organizational resources but rather as an event capable of triggering a transformation of the affective, relational and cognitive dynamics of a movement. Inspired by the concept of *eventful temporality* elaborated by Sewell (1996), according to which events are defined as occurrences capable of transforming the social structure, della Porta



proposes that we think in terms of *eventful protest* in order to focus on those events which, within certain cycles of protest, affect structures by creating new organizational networks, connecting pre-existing frames of action and establishing new bonds.

Going back to the results of the analysis conducted on Macao, it is possible to understand how linking communication practices and artistic production is a shared *eventful logic*. The study of media practices reveals how online activity mainly consisted in the dissemination of an imaginary functional to the deployment of the event in the urban space. The occupation of the Galfa Tower can be considered as a “big event” in its own right, as a surprising occurrence that actualized the unexpected and disclosed unforeseen possibilities.<sup>57</sup>

In line with the founders’ desire to oppose the neoliberal logic of cultural events, Macao’s first major public act deployed a new meaning of an “event”, as an opportunity for change, insurgence of the unpredictable and irruption of new generative forces in society. “The event is not the solution to predetermined problems, it is rather the opening of new possibilities that pose new questions and solicit the imagination of new replies” (Lazzarato, 2005, p. 13). Bringing back to life the inanimate space of the Galfa Tower created the conditions in which it was possible to start and develop a political discourse on the social role of art and on cultural expression, on the value and the practice of the commons. At this point we can recuperate the notion of *logic* elaborated by Juris and apply it to the case of Macao, specifying an *eventful logic* based on the strategic and cultural appropriation of that generative dynamic highlighted by the notion of *eventful protest* proposed by della Porta. The strategic character of the appropriation is due to the symbolic rupture triggered by the occupation of the Galfa Tower, which provided the context for the legitimation of a new political discourse. The consolidation was based on a deep cultural rootedness capable of interacting with both the professional competencies of the activists and the recreational and convivial habits of the metropolitan public intercepted by Macao.

In contrast to the *paradigmatic* definitions that we have found in recent literature, I propose a *pragmatic* concept, in which the relevance of digital media for mobilization has to be empirically detailed in the light of cultural logics that appropriate them and make them

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<sup>57</sup> The concept of an event is deeply rooted in western philosophy; however, it is especially since the 1968 that post-metaphysical philosophy deeply reinvented the understanding of event. Badiou, Derrida, Deleuze, and Heidegger before them, are the fundamental thinkers who have considered events. Although they have significant differences – at the ontological level, regarding the singularity or plurality of the event, on its immanence or transcendence, or its susceptibility to a hermeneutic or dialectic comprehension – all these authors attribute in a relatively consistent manner the following features to the event: it is contingent, unpredictable, radically transformative. Nestled in the epistemological struggles of the time, the notion of an event constitutes a hinge between structuralism and subjectivist approaches. As this research has empirically observed concerning the various possible interpretations of event, the notion of an event also appears “amphibious” in philosophical terms, to the extent that the boundary that separates the event-break from the event that reproduces the status quo is treacherous.

significant. It is likely that the empirical eccentricity of Macao, compared to the analytical models discussed, not only indicates its contingent specificity but calls into question the applicability of conceptual categories derived solely from the technological characteristics of the media investigated. The analysis of communication practices combined with the analysis of Macao's process of coming into existence has enabled me to establish empirically the notion of eventful logic as the *fil rouge* between the technological affordances concretely valorised and the structuring of the agency of Macao. To conclude, what I would like to suggest for future investigation and verification is not so much a new label: it is, rather, an analytical method in which the role of mediated communication practices is investigated as a dynamic interdependence between the digital tools used, the cultural contexts and the subjects who inhabit them, and their specific skills and strategies.

However, even in the stabilization phase, the event has continued to play a crucial role in the symbolic mediation of Macao. The diary of the last year looks like a patchwork of concerts, workshops, theatre performances, meetings and festivals hosted in the new occupied space. It is no longer possible to find on its website a coherent discourse about what Macao is, and what its objectives and its purposes are. The progressive chain of events is the only framework of discursive production of Macao in recent months, when resources for self-narration began to dry up. This development naturally responds to the needs of economic sustainability, but it is also consistent with the professional skills of the people involved, being knowledge workers who are able to set up events and communication campaigns in a very short time. Paradoxically, the activists themselves have exported, in Macao, their own *eventful language*, intended as a symbolic framework of the signs and meanings they learned in the creative industries in which they work and against which they are mobilized.

# Chapter 4

## Organizing Relations

*We seek authenticity in the deed of revolt.*

*We won't sacrifice it either to organization or to proselytism*

*Carla Lonzi*

### 4.1 Introduction

The present chapter intends to investigate the organizational and relational aspects of the life and activities of Macao. Organization and relation are two terms that relate to different schemes and political sensibilities. Whereas organizing entails a structured and structuring activity aimed at efficacy and goal-attainment, relation constitutes a looser and wider concept that embraces both general human relations and the abstract ideas that shape groups, communities and organizations. In this sense, the concept of relation allows room for a political stance, room that is often used by social movements, whose aims often include a struggle to define new modes of relations and, ultimately, to search for a different (and better) life. It is in the difference between these two concepts that this chapter draws its analytical space.

Within Macao, the issue of organization is rarely worded in these terms, rather it is framed in relational terms, implying such topics as care, conflict, embodiment and power distribution. Following a grounded approach, I was able to isolate the thematic strand of relation, but it was during the validation stage that I realized that the discursive production about relations ultimately referred to organizational forms. Relation, within Macao, represents a discursive device through which it is possible to deal with the multiple empirical options that are available, in terms of configuration of participation and, most importantly, through which one can tackle, reflexively, the political and ethical issues connected to organization.

The theme of relation is crucial for the life of Macao, both as regards its internal and external dynamics. Concerning the internal point of view, relations are fundamental to the extent that they constitute a field in which struggles are fought in order to establish a hierarchy among the other core areas of Macao's activities: action and production. In particular, as we will see in the final chapter, relations are deeply interconnected with both the logic of action and the models of cultural production. Concerning the former, as we have highlighted in the previous chapter, the eventful logic draws on bodies acting together, on the deployment of affective

dynamics based on artistic and aesthetic elements that produce strong ties. Concerning the latter, as we will see in the following chapter, the design and the implementation of alternative models of cultural production is often conducted with relations in mind, both as oppositional and supportive elements. Relations, therefore, do not only play their roles as if they were confined to two separate realms, but they also act as a hinge between the inside and the outside of Macao.<sup>58</sup>

The main aim of this chapter is to identify the relational mechanics at work within Macao. To this end, three main dimensions will be explored. The first tackles the articulation between the individual and the collective level of participation, a peculiar articulation that produces what I define as a *non-exclusive dialectic* between the two levels. The second investigates the organization of participation along the opposed and co-existing notions of horizontality and hierarchy: analyzing the constantly shifting balance between radical inclusion and leadership. I will stress how this particular configuration allows a *legitimate monopoly of symbolic capital* of recognized leaders that co-exists with a refusal of horizontality—this latter is understood as an inescapable axiom of contemporary mobilizations. The third and last dimension is the collaborative making processes, which helps to build and maintain relations and to handle conflicts in a better way. This last dimension will run as a more background dimension as it is embedded in the first two dimensions and influences, in an encompassing way, Macao's relations.

The exploration of these dimensions is in line with the overarching aim of the chapter, which is to try to pin down Macao's organizational model. Linked to the findings of the previous chapter concerning the eventfulness of their logic of political mobilization, Macao can be envisioned not as a well-defined organization that produces events but as a link of events in itself. In other words, an event might also act as an organizational device for which Macao does not produce events in order to persist as an organization with its structures and roles but as a series of events that become the organization of action and communication.

## 4.2 Framing organization in hybrid movements

In the last decade a literature on organization and social movements has been emerging, highlighting the fact that a convergence of organization and social movement studies should take place (Davies and Zald, 2005). As noted by Clemens (2005), however, social movement

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<sup>58</sup> In particular, it is telling what happened with “Occupare in Conflitto” (Occupying conflict), a series of seminars that originated in episodes of sexist violence and homophobia that occurred within Macao. The idea embodied in this initiative was to address, publicly, the relational dysfunctions within Macao: dysfunctions that also affect other collectives and, more generally, the “outside” of Macao. <http://www.macaomilano.org/diario/fonte/occupare-il-conflitto>

scholars demonstrate a deep discomfort with the concept of organization. Conceived as a system of order and authority, it seems incapable of taking into account processes of social change. Growing attention has been dedicated to how activists are able to avoid structures and processes of institutionalisation, with new media playing an important role in providing a non-hierarchical environment. It is the case of connective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) in which social mechanisms characterised by weak ties have allegedly made it possible to overcome the rigidity of collective action, whereas the latter is conceived as a super structural process that endangers freedom and fluidity.

Issues of power and leadership in movements have been relatively neglected in the last five years. In fact, only recently has a renewed interest in these dynamics re-emerged, countering the overwhelming quantity of contributions that have emphasized the flat and distributed nature of the new forms of mobilization, marginalizing the role of leadership and hierarchy. An indicator of this trend is the latest work of the major sociologist Manuel Castells (2012), which deals with the wave of mobilization that has been sparked globally since 2010. In his previous book Castells had dealt extensively with the issue of power (Castells 2009). In his most recent book he conceives of the autonomy of “third spaces” – the spaces resulting from the interconnection between occupied urban spaces and digital networks – as being based on the intrinsically free nature of the online space (Castells 2012: 222). Other studies highlight, however, how digital networks are deeply influenced by mechanisms of verticality, authority and exclusion (Gonzalez-Bailon and Wang 2013, Nunes 2014). Other authors (Arvidsson *et. al.* 2015, Gerbaudo 2015) state that we need to overcome the network paradigm in order to better understand the crowd dynamics that are emerging in social media as well as in processes of mobilization.

Within the literature that attempts to return attention to issues of leadership and power, within the field of social movements, the contribution of Simon Western (2014) helps us to remember how anarchists like Bakunin, Proudhon and Kropotkin did not have particular taboos regarding dealing with leadership. For them “individuals and groups take temporary leadership autonomously and on behalf of the wider collective, without assuming a formal position of power or authority over others” (Western 2014: 676). In this respect interesting connections emerge between the issues of leadership, entrepreneurship and processes of political mobilization. Critical management studies have recently brought together these three areas (Swann and Stoborod 2014) from an anarchist point of view – similarly to what Gregory Sholette (2011) has proposed in the field of art criticism in his latest book, in which he analyses the artistic world facing enterprise culture. Particularly relevant is Sholette’s

understanding of the subsumption (and the mirroring, I would add) of artistic organizational models by enterprises:

It's not the artist's seemingly transgressive, risk-taking non-conformity, but exactly a mode of distributed risk and social cooperation denied by neoliberalism that leads certain CEOs and business thinkers to see artistic methods as near-miraculous models of "just-in-time creativity." (Sholette 2011: 43)

From a different angle social movement scholars interrogate the same nexus that brings together cultural innovation, artistic radicalism and forms of disruption to existing capitalist forms. Davis, in particular, focuses on topological similarities among social movements and enterprises.

Internally formal organizations would seem to exhibit emergent features and mobilization processes very similar to those we see in social movement groups. Similarly, in their external relations, formal organizations also would seem to mirror their movement counterparts, participating, as they do, in fluid relationships with other organizations, joining in coalitions, and engaging in political action to affect state policy (Davis *et. al.*, 2005 : xiv)

What, then, are these movements? Are they still movements as we used to know them – with the same recruitment and organizational mechanics? Let's be clear, I'm not proposing a new label. Social movement studies have provided extremely valuable insights about social movements; however, as has recently been pointed out, they forgot to include capitalism in the equation (Barker *et. al.* 2013). In the attempt to capture the specificity of movements that embody the heritage of artistic avant-gardes, workers' movements and start-ups, a multiplicity of perspectives must be interwoven. In the Italian and international context growing attention has been paid to cultural and social entrepreneurship, to social innovation, and to peer-to-peer forms of production and organization (Arvidsson and Peteirsen 2012). At the same time, social movements and squatting centres have radically changed (Prujiit 2013; Moore 2015) – increasingly becoming hubs of cultural production and experimentation rather than spaces of social healing and inclusion. In other words, hybrid forms are emerging in this complex field, and Macao is certainly one among them.

### 4.3 The strength of strong ties

Dust, paint, sweat, smell of sweat, detergents, brooms, dustpans, paper, wood beams, coffee, pasta, couscous, coffee, beer, wine, myrtle, cigarettes, computers, music, books, photographs, songs, dances, assemblies, respect, growth, smiles, rages, fears, hugs, kisses, dreams, passions...encounters<sup>59</sup>.

This excerpt from the diary of Macao was written during the summer of 2012. It allows us to understand the material, emotional and symbolic dimensions that were attached to the making of Macao. In fact, shortly after the occupation of the former slaughterhouse of Milan (June 2012), Macao launched a Summer Camp<sup>60</sup>. This was a two-month long initiative to turn the building into a hospitable place for Macao. The diary was published every day for the whole duration of the Summer Camp and it never bore the name of its individual author (if there was one). The Summer Camp served multiple purposes, and through it we can see some of the key elements that characterize relations in Macao. In the first place, it satisfied a need to widen and consolidate relations inside Macao.

I wake up rested, perfumed in a soft and cleaned bed... what a strange feeling! It was a couple of weeks that it did not happen..if I knew this would not happen anymore, I think I'd go crazy. Yet now, in the comfort and cleanliness of my house I feel trapped, I miss my fellas' laughter, the endless discussions and that sense of community, where everyone gives, for better or for worse, in stress and in joy. And so on riding my horse, wind in sails and wings spread to Macao. (Summer Camp day 2)

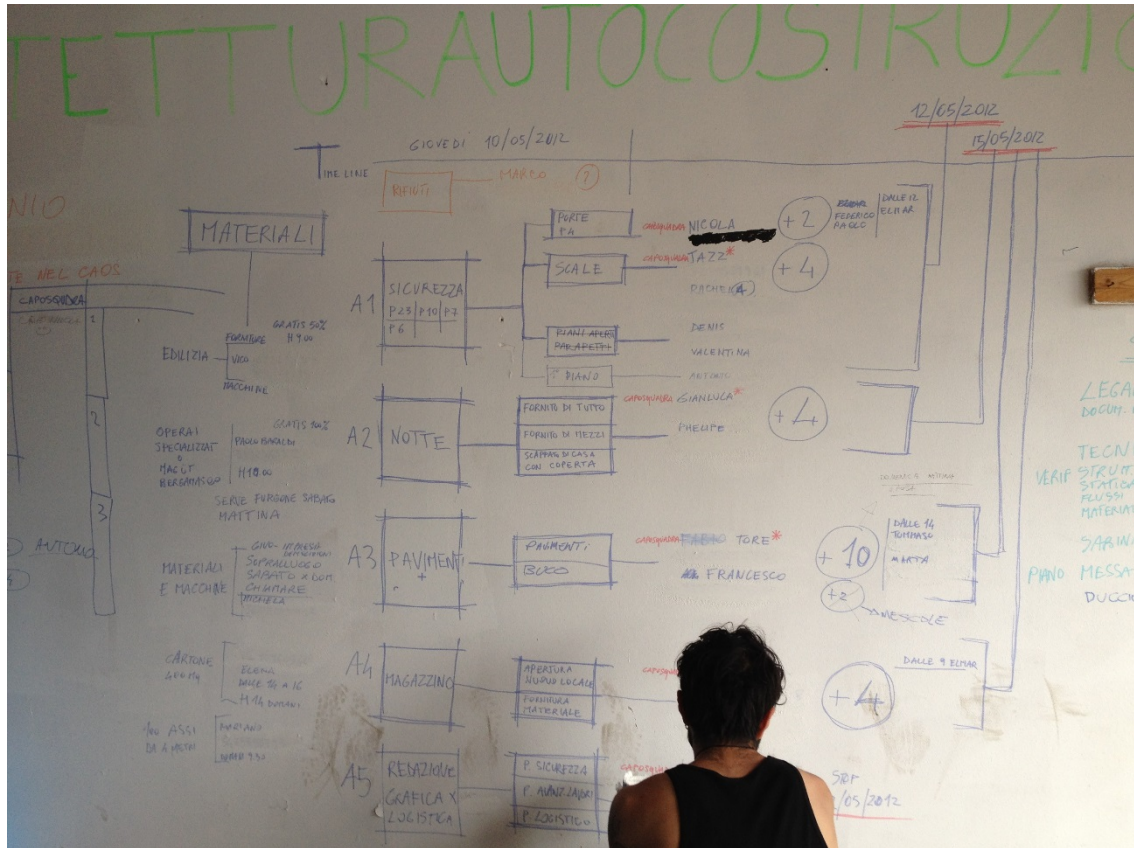
The emotional attachment, the detachment from private houses as traps which separate each other, the need to continue on the flow started in Torre Galfa, the enthusiasm, the desire to make a space a bit your own, to live collectively under the same roof for weeks, abandoning routines and comfort – all of this constitutes a concrete sign of what the lived experience of Macao meant for its activists and collaborators. In interviews conducted later, this period of intense work [insert picture] was retrospectively acknowledged as a sort of golden age, during which Macao was genuinely driven by desire. In this first period, the people in Macao who had technical skills organized the work so that others could learn and be safe when carrying out work which was not always intuitive and immediate, or safe. A process like Macao's, started by artists, becomes entangled with craft, in a process in which, from the de-

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<sup>59</sup> Summer Camp diary, day two. <http://www.macaomilano.org/articoli/3190/macao-summer-camp-giorno-due>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5dfNYVWe6Y>

materialization of art, passing through the relational and social wave, it becomes a living process that is deeply-rooted in everyday practice and largely outside institutions, and in a process of active drift from them. Being captured, to use Deleuzian jargon, does not really matter here, since the starting point of Macao's political action is that we all are already subsumed.



Picture 1. Differentiation of tasks and organization in Macao

The Summer Camp, more pragmatically, served the functional imperative of improving the quality of the space and re-signifying the space itself, a task that was achieved with a particular aesthetic/political frame in mind. In order to better describe this frame, I combine an ethnographic with an historical analysis, finding substantial analogies with the ideas previously developed by the Isola Art Center (cf. 1.3) – where some of the Macao founders were involved (and are still involved, in some cases) – in clear opposition to the practices of the institutional art world. In the first place, their idea of having a space as a *dirty cube* – opposing the neutral white cube that is widespread in museums and exhibitions – implies refusing a denaturalizing aestheticization of the occupied space. In other words, in order to create a New Centre for Arts and Culture that intends to host and produce alternative art and culture (or, at least, do it in a different way) one must make it perceivable also in aesthetic and architectural terms. This meant leaving the marks of abandonment visible, to apply a selective political/aesthetic judgement according to which it appeared legitimate to reveal



the marble – covered in a dull white paint - that framed some of the doors but, at the same time, to avoid the temptation to paint anew entire rooms. Secondly, the notion of *fight-specific*, underlying that the cultural and artistic processes taking place in the occupied space must take into account the local needs. In this sense, re-signifying that space implied establishing a dialogue with the neighbourhood, to organize initiatives and explorations of the vast area that surrounds (ex. walks in the abandoned slaughterhouse), making the walls of the Macello speak, and porous to contamination from the outside. Third, and finally, the idea of a *dispersed centre*: that is, to conceive of the art centre not as a physical space but rather as a mental and bodily attitude. (cf. Isola Art Center, 2013)

Furthermore, the Summer Camp expressed a will to establish an image of Macao as a positive and constructive force of the city of Milan. In this respect, Summer Camp can be viewed as one of the first projects that was developed in the former slaughterhouse exchange, through which a part of the Milanese citizenry was implicated. More precisely, it provided those stuck in the city – due to the traditional Italian summer break in August, during which cities are deserted – with an alternative way to learn new things,<sup>61</sup> to cooperate, to work and to be part of something. It is interesting to note that all of these process aspects, although subject to a constant process of becoming and change, were also present in the initial project of what Macao should and could have been, as established by the “founders”. In fact, in a YouTube video created for the launch campaign in April 2012 that the autonomist intellectual and activist Franco Berardi, “Bifo”, clearly states that occupying should not constitute an end in itself and that what has to be done goes way beyond that. In his words:

It's not about occupying the streets, although we will continue to do it, it's not to ravage London [...] blocking factories and the daily death [...] It is about the fact that, while we do all this, we must be aware that the soul of the problem is ... the soul. It is the collective body, our ability to return to live and express solidarity. Solidarity is not an ethical or a political value, solidarity is the problem of living next to the body of the other, solidarity is the awareness that my interest is the same of the others, solidarity is the pleasure of living in the city as a place where we are together. This is what we have to do, rebuild solidarity, and to do that, Macao: burn banks, set London and Athens to fire, block roads, occupy the factories – of course, if all this is necessary. But maybe what is essential is the word, the sign, the dream, the imagination, in every possible way.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Such as music editing, masonry and restoration.

<sup>62</sup> My translation. Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njqAiP4gX04> (Accessed December 2014).

The relevance of Berardi's comment is at least dual. In the first place, although originating from a pessimistic analysis of contemporary society<sup>63</sup> he focuses on solidarity in an attempt to stress how only together might we eventually overcome our "sad times". This is the same trajectory that was followed and experienced by Macao activists, sick as they were of the depressive self-pity so widespread in the previous assemblies of precarious workers in which they had participated. Secondly, it signals the performative role of the intellectual discourse on the shaping of a movement. Macao was not even born when Berardi uttered those words and it is noteworthy how his contribution was actually embodied in the concrete activities of Macao: in particular, if we consider how intensely Macao worked on the sign and the imaginary. This "heritage" shows us once more the deep affinity of Macao with the theorists of the previous generation.

Furthermore, the very fact that it was possible for Macao to secure the endorsement of influential public intellectuals reveals the peculiar social status of Macao's founders: a kind of *marginal elite* within the Italian cultural realm, bearers of a high cultural capital, with middle class backgrounds who directly took part, often with highly visible roles, in the previous waves of mobilization both at national and international level. In fact, it was only due to the previous connections already established by the founders of Macao that they could reach the cultural and intellectual panorama. This is a sort of co-belonging that not only ties Macao activists to leading figures in the critical thought but also with more institutional actors in the city of Milan.

Relations in Macao, then, are sites of affect, a fundamental political space in which bonding happens, a space emphasized by the activists as the true space in which activism is based. The worthiness of a political endeavour must be evaluated on the quality of such relations, and not based on the results attained. Or perhaps it should not be evaluated at all – it must be lived, in all its complexity, joy, disorientation, but also conflicts. Macao, as a composite reality, partially reflects the complexity of society, and with it bears the marks of some of the traditional cleavages that affect our societies more globally. The next section will deal with such conflicts.

#### **4.4 Taking care of conflicts**

As Macao activists have experienced, being part of a movement – even of a movement where a deep solidarity was successfully built and where the collective endeavours have a substantial individual salience – does not automatically mean that the conflicts that flow through the

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Berardi's analysis on contemporary society and suicides (Berardi, 2015).

social body of a movement will be overcome. In particular, it is in the latency phase of a movement that the typical euphoria – or sense of urgency – leaves room for an everydayness (although revolutionised, or in the conscious attempt of being revolutionised) and for a reflexive take on the newly constituted body within and across the movement.

This process has to be considered with regard to the changing composition of Macao. In fact, starting from the relatively homogenous group of Macao's "founders", hundreds of people joined the process in the "normalized" phase, the start of which coincided with the occupation of the former slaughterhouse exchange. After June 2012 it was not only artists that were present; rather, cultural workers in the widest sense were also present: video-makers, employees, students, plus a smaller group of squatters with more technical and manual skills. What is relevant for the present chapter is to investigate how the cleavages that run through this new composition were addressed, politically and organizationally, by Macao. Particularly relevant conflicts emerged around the issues of gender, material vs. immaterial work and the digital divide. As I have hinted before, the starting point here is the understanding that the sheer fact of being together in Macao, both individually and collectively, did not result differences among participants being overlooked. Therefore, as conflicts arose, assemblies were dedicated to the discussion of such issues, and in some particularly relevant cases, seminars and meetings were organized in order to cope explicitly with them.

Gender, at least in numeric terms, is not an issue for Macao. The overall composition of Macao shows a substantial equity in terms of male and female distribution, as the self-inquiry conducted by Macao makes clear (26 males and 24 females in December 2012). What is at stake, then, were the imbalances in roles and functions within the organization. During my ethnography I was able to grasp how, among the activists, there was a perceived unease regarding a male dominance in the assemblies. In particular, during a seminar organized in March 2013, called "Occupare il conflitto" (occupying the conflict),<sup>64</sup> Macao activists pointed out how males were more likely to take their talking turns during the assemblies and to speak longer, and they were much more likely to occupy the public sphere. However, during this seminar, led by Federica Giardini, a feminist and political philosopher from the University of Rome, the picture was revealed to be far more complex. In particular, it emerged that relations are not determined by gender belonging per se. In fact, as Angelo says in his intervention during the seminar:

It has not to do with being male or female, it relates with a masculine or feminine attitude. Here in Macao there are female people who have masculine attitudes, they shut

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. note 1

me up within the assemblies, and I cannot take the floor (audience laughs) because they have this attitude. Therefore it is reductive to say that in Macao assemblies, or in the national and public meetings, only men can speak, it is about a masculine attitude.<sup>65</sup>

Furthermore, it is not that women have no voice in Macao: they express it in different ways and using different channels one of which being the digital social media. Using digital methods and techniques (Rogers 2013) I have analysed the flows in the Macao mailing list. The data refers to the main mailing list used by the activists, labelled the “Communication Mailing List” (CML). This mailing list was initially dedicated to the discussions of the homonymous group that was in charge of Macao’s external communications. Later on, this mailing list actually came to host a number of different topics and it has come to serve as a hub, with multiple functions. In the first place, activists use the list to post news from media outlets and ask for support or additional work in order to make news publishable in Macao’s social media channels. Secondly, together with the online platform, which is based on WordPress, the CML constitutes a vibrant space of discussion concerning the assemblies and their agenda, and for sharing information that is relevant to the life of Macao (public calls, news from the national network of Occupied Theatres, news concerning the global social movement scene etc.).

The data extracted from the CML amounts to around 3,000 emails and spans the period from June 2013 to June 2015. The data has been elaborated using Gephi<sup>66</sup> and, together with Gephi’s visualization capabilities, it allows us to understand to what extent women are implicated in Macao’s communications. In fact, among the top 10 contributors we find only three men. More significantly, the first contributor, Camilla, shows a degree of engagement that appears to be more than twice (weight=1337) that of the second most active user (weight=668).<sup>67</sup> Ethnographic insight gathered during the fieldwork allows us to understand that Camilla is in fact the person who, since the beginning of Macao’s life, has acted as the “head” of Macao’s communication. This information is represented graphically by the thickness of the edge that connects her to the central node, which represents the CML itself. Analyzing the data from the mailing list more closely, it is possible to notice how a greater activity does not necessarily correlate with the influence of a person node. Influence is based here on betweenness centrality,<sup>68</sup> a metric that indicates to what extent a person acts as an

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<sup>65</sup> Macao activist (male and gay) intervention during the Occupare il Conflitto seminar, May 2013, Macao.

<sup>66</sup> <http://gephi.github.io/>

<sup>67</sup> The weight of an edge that connects each person (represented by a node) to the mailing list (small node at the centre of the graph) is based on the numbers of emails sent.

<sup>68</sup> The algorithm used to calculate betweenness centrality is Brandes (2001).

intermediary between two other people in the group. This metric is represented by the size and the darkness of a person: the darker and the bigger the node, the more influence a person holds in the group.

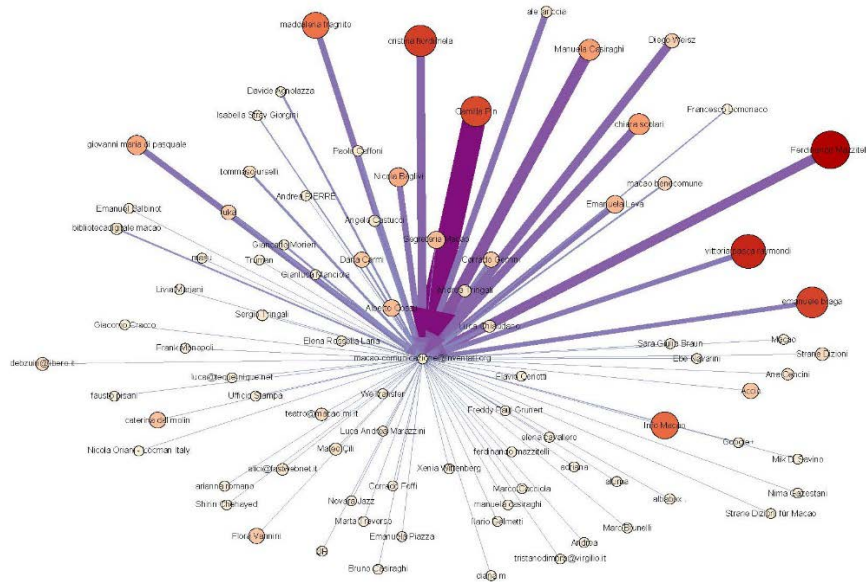
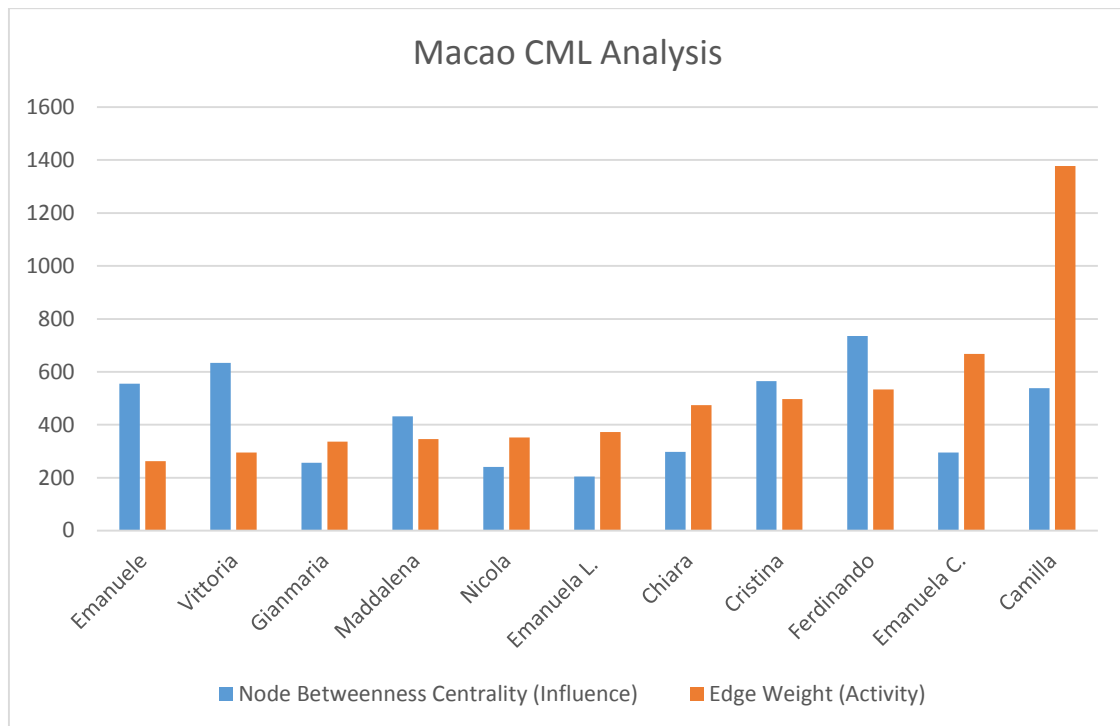


Image 1. Graph of CML elaborated in Gephi

As is clear in the next graphic (cf. Graphic 1), there is no linear correspondence between activity and influence. New subjects emerge, showing a substantial lower activity coupled with a much higher influence. In particular, two males (Emanuele and Ferdinando) and a female (Vittoria) emerge as influencers. How is it possible to explain this discrepancy? Following the data, it shows that these three people have been engaging in email conversations with a wider number of participants, and are therefore acting as connectors among different sub-groups. Two of them were also part of the initial group that founded Macao, while Vittoria has been a very active member of the Macao theatre group, and has therefore engaged in discussions with them as well as linking their discussions to the main group. Therefore, I suggest that influence also reflects the social dynamics that take place in Macao's offline activities.



Graphic 1. Analysis of CML for Betweenness Centrality and Edge Weight (top 11 users)

This takes us to the digital divide issue within Macao. Notwithstanding the high degree of media literacy, typical of knowledge workers, Macao’s digital tools are not used by the whole of its constituency. In particular, there are two main reasons for this phenomenon. In the first place, in Macao is at present a relatively small group of people who actually live in the occupied building. They live there due material need or, in a few cases, as a political choice or for security reasons.<sup>69</sup> It is important to note that this small group (five people) neither uses the social digital platforms provided by Macao nor engages in most of the “deliberative” bodies – namely, the weekly assemblies and the working groups. Another kind of digital divide concerns the Macao online realm itself. This is related to the internal diversification of platforms implemented for internal communication or geared towards intra-organizational ends. Adopting a diachronic perspective, we can distribute these tools according to whether they are inclusive or exclusive. These two latter categories are to be considered in relative terms, in which the ideal absolute extremes are total inclusion and complete secrecy. It must be noted that personal texts sent via mobile phone or personal emails could not be traced for technical and ethical reasons, both digital and ethnographical.

<sup>69</sup> Since the beginning, the policy in terms of dwelling has been highly debated. In their first occupation (the Torre Galfa skyscraper), people slept there in order to be present in high numbers to resist eviction. While at the Exchange of the former slaughterhouse, where Macao is currently based, people dwell in the building in a sort of unlawful behaviour as regards Macao’s very informal policies. This is tolerated because most of these people would not have the means to sustain the costs of private housing, and because they actually provide a number of technical and manual “services” which are vital to Macao’s economy and cultural activity.

<b>Time Period</b>	<b>Inclusive</b>	<b>Exclusive</b>
April – May 2012	Facebook groups (100+ members)	Mobile phones
June – Dec. 2012	WordPress platform (self-registration, no invite required)	Mailing list of each working group
Jan. 2013 – Sept. 2014	CML + Whatsapp (global chat, 100+ members)	WordPress platform (invite only + more exclusive groups are created within the platform itself) / Whatsapp for each working group
Sept. 2014– current	CML	Whatsapp abandoned

A tentative systematization of the differences that segment Macao's body, can be drawn by using two axes, in order to build an imaginary space within which to allocate Macao's constituency. The first axis represents the artistic skills (AS), while the second axis accounts for the communication skills (CS). The intersection of the two axes produces four ideal types of activist as regards the inter-linkage between competences and communication: it produces four quadrants, representing different ideal-typical categories of Macao members. The first, showing a high degree of (AS) and a lower degree of (CS) can be defined as a "pure" artists: a person who is not particularly keen on manual and technical tasks, whose contribution is merely artistic (e.g. performing or organizing artistic events in Macao). The second category is the "artistic communicator", and includes the people in Macao that not only hold AS but are willing to transpose their AS into ideas that can be circulated in digital space (e.g. setting up a campaign "artistically" inspired to be diffused on Macao's Facebook page).<sup>70</sup> The following category, the "technical communicator", represents all those activists who contribute to Macao's official communication but not necessarily by deploying highly creative processes.<sup>71</sup> Activities in this are closer to public relations and also include the sharing of artistic content through social media. Finally, the fourth category, what I have defined as "technical activist", constitutes a residual category composed of subjects who show a low degree of both sets of skills whose contribution to Macao lies in their manual/technical work. This fourth category partially overlaps with the dwellers group but

<sup>70</sup> I will analyze closely one of such campaigns in the next section.

<sup>71</sup> It must be noted how these processes are key to the production of value and constitute a fundamental form of work in our digital lives (Arvidsson 2012), and a site of capitalist value-extraction (Terranova, 2002).

for its being a highly stylized category, it also functions to produce difference from which the meaning of the other three categories derive. As in every classification, rigidity is a disadvantage of seeking analytical clarity; in fact, the same actor at different points in time can play various of these categories/roles: a choreographer can act as a pure artist when she invents a performance to be staged in the urban space. She can become an artistic communicator by setting up a creative campaign based on that performance.<sup>72</sup> She might be a pure technical communicator when she tags people online in order to secure higher visibility of the creative campaign, and, finally, she can be a purely manual activist when she repairs the floor of the room in which the choreography has been rehearsed. This is not to say that I am invalidating my own typology since there is an empirical truth supporting it, insofar as these different ideal types mirror social and cultural cleavages among the rank and file of Macao, as I have highlighted in the methodological chapter. In particular, the activist I have described, capable of embodying the four different roles, actually represents a normative ideal that has been explicitly criticized within Macao. In the life of Macao the ideal activist is someone who is dedicating resources and time to individual and collective projects created within the movement and, most importantly, is capable of responding to the four ideal-audiences that scrutinize their work from every corner. This means that the ideal Macao activist must respond to a certain idea of engaged political art (cf. 1.4), show a high effectiveness and originality in her digital engagement, and conform to a hard-working stereotype when it comes to sharing content or performing manual work for Macao. More specifically, the activist must not just respond to these normative requirements or ideal-typical audiences, but they must also appear worthy of their co-belonging, in the eyes of the different concrete sub-groups that populate Macao. Actually, very few people in any organization can perform multiple roles at the highest standard in terms of quality and/or commitment. In particular, what appears relevant in terms of conflicts within Macao is that if some of the immaterial workers tend to have – at least – the basic resources to perform clerical or manual tasks, the contrary is rarely the case. This helps us to connect the cleavage between the immaterial and material workers with the issue of leadership. In other words, given the higher accessibility of competences required to perform manual skills compared to the soft skills,<sup>73</sup> the immaterial worker is more likely to get closer to the normative ideal that is prevalent in Macao. The picture is more complex, because, as I have experienced in my

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<sup>72</sup> A performance might as well integrate elements to make it shareable online, as we have hinted in the previous chapter considering the dual nature of the political events set in motion by Macao, in their being events and media events since their inception. (cf. 3.3)

<sup>73</sup> Including different types of capital (social, cultural, symbolic) that are partially inherited and partially acquired through extensive education.



ethnography, this does not simply result in sheer domination. In fact, it is thanks to the peculiar organization model created and incessantly re-invented by Macao that effective counter powers are possible. We will say more about this at the end of the chapter but, before that, it is necessary to say something about Macao's concrete experiences.

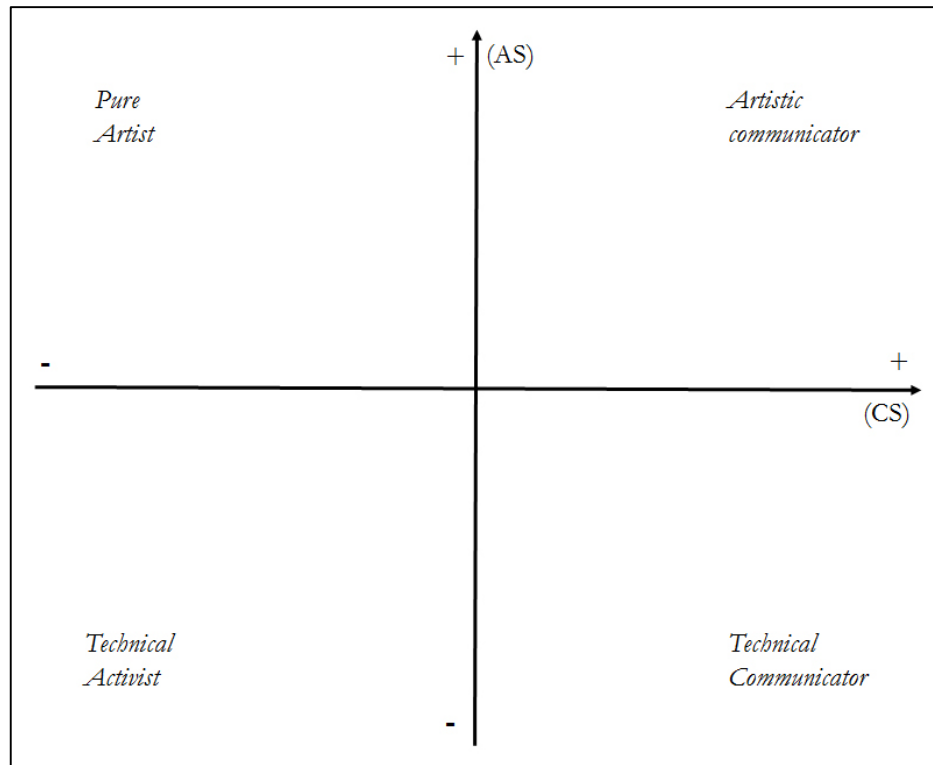


Image 2. Macao constituency ideal types

#### 4.5 Relations in practice

In order to assess Macao's organizational model I will look now at their cooperative practices and the relations implicated in them. I will present two cases that are different in a number of aspects, which will help to highlight the specificity of Macao's organization.

##### Case 1. Rebuilding the rooftop

Since the occupation of the former slaughterhouse exchange improvements have been constantly in progress or on the agenda. One major project dealt with the rooftop, the condition of which meant that rain poured into the building, and also presented the risk of pieces of heavy glass falling right into the main hall of the building where the most popular events hosted by Macao take place. In practical terms, the work consisted of removing the old glass plates – which weighed about 30 kilograms – and substituting them

with new and lighter polycarbonate panels. The roof condition was known since the first day of the occupation, back in June 2012, and it is telling that the press release and the video were both released in June 2014, shortly after the work had been accomplished.

Period of work: eight months.

Cost of materials: € 7000.

People involved: eight per day, on average.

Days worked: 30.

The first data tells us that it took 16 months to actually reach the necessary conditions in order to start the repair operation. It is not that the roof repair was not a compelling task, but rather the proliferation of other projects and urgent tasks constantly competed in the list of goals to be achieved. Furthermore, the substantial amount of financial resources needed, €7000, was also a major cause of delay since an organization like Macao does not dispose of that amount of money at any single given moment. This implied a slow but constant allocation of funds in order to buy the necessary materials. It must be noted that none of the activists received remuneration for this project.

There were, on average, eight people involved. These included members of the former self-building working group, some from the “dwellers” group and artistic activists who were familiar with technical work. One person, usually the most competent or bravest, was harnessed and worked from the inside to detach the glass plate from the roof structure while a team of three people was dedicated to slowly removing and sliding the heavy glass to the group standing next to them on solid ground. The group coordinated mainly face-to-face and through personal social media (Whatsapp). In fact, no discussions about this project were conducted in mailing lists or in the WordPress platform. Two more relevant features of this project, that are useful when seeking to pin down Macao’s organizational model, consist in its drive ( a material need sustained by the consensual agreement of the assembly), and its inward orientation, since it aimed to take care of Macao’s own space.



Image 3. Activists fixing the rooftop of Macao (frame from YouTube video)<sup>74</sup>

To conclude, the video produced in order to document the rooftop repair allows us to connect once more the level of physical work to a discursive level – in this case analysing its translation into a visual narration. The video in itself was edited so as to produce a time-lapse sequence, a technique that renders the passing of time considerably faster. On the one hand, this technique helps to shrink a long activity into a few minutes of video; on the other hand it is used to contrast the lyrics of the song that plays throughout the whole video. The choice of the song and its lyrics is in itself telling of the activists' approach. The author, Enzo del Re, was a radical singer who was active in the late 1960s and early 1970s, who had been trained as a classical musician but always refused to play normal instruments, and instead used only a chair to accompany his voice; he also requests as a fee for his performances the minimum pay of a metalworker. A political stance, the one of Enzo del Re close to the post-workerism and the Italian political “autonomy” which also constitutes a background of Macao. The lyrics of the first verse of the song are as follows:

*Working with slowness  
without making any effort,  
quickness harms, and makes you  
end up in the hospital,  
in the hospital there's no place  
and you can die very soon*

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<sup>74</sup> Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdG67mbzKZQ>.

## Case 2. “Non è mica la Luna” campaign

In July 2013 the Ligresti family, whose financial group legally owned the Torre Galfa skyscraper occupied by Macao the year before, was subject to three arrests for bankruptcy.<sup>75</sup> This fact triggered a strong and immediate reaction in Macao. One group thought it was the perfect chance to re-gain possession of the tower, now legitimized by the arrests of former owners. This project was discussed by a small group through personal media (Whatsapp, phone calls) and a closed mailing list; only hours afterwards did it reach the more open mailing list, in which a lively debate took place. During the day, the majority of Macao activists were busy with their “day jobs” so a long conversation within the common platform (99 posts) took place: another small group countered the idea of occupying again the tower. They agreed that something must be done, that there was a desire to do so, and that the best way to further discuss it was to meet physically. Performing a content analysis of the 99 posts that compose the discussion about re-occupying the tower, I have isolated six main discursive elements.

The first element is an orientation towards action (galfa, action, tower, make, com'on, forward).

The second is an orientation towards relation (macao, are, we, we want, we have, we do, we think, common).

The third regroups words that delineate an analytical stance (regulation, Ligresti, prosecutor, speculation, contents, issue, proposal).

The fourth deals with a spatial matters and the time frame (now, here, tomorrow, city, moment, space, slaughterhouse, Milano, square, day, evening, tonight).

The fifth contains the modes of action (photo, saying, occupation, to build, to go).

The sixth shows a reflexive take (it would, but, it might, consider, it could).

The content analysis of this discussion allows us to empirically grasp the plurality of needs and orientations that co-exist in Macao. What happens, then, is that those who propose re-occupying are, in the first instance, obliged to enter into a dialogue with the whole Macao constituency. Secondly, the dialogue takes place in the digital environment where their position is not countered but evaluated, commented on and included with a number of other projects that could take place instead of the re-occupation. The conclusion of this

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<sup>75</sup> <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-07-17/ligresti-family-members-arrested-in-fondiaria-sai-probe>.

dialogue was that the matter necessitated a face-to-face meeting where the group proposing to occupy would face a larger group that had started to support a public campaign. The result of this nightly discussion was to abandon the re-occupation idea because of material difficulties and because it was also perceived as having a limited political impact. Nonetheless, the consensus arising from this meeting around the campaign was not a sign of repression of the desires of a minor radical fringe, it rather represented the capacity of the other group's desires to spread to the whole assembly. The result of this exchange was that a campaign was established.

The campaign was divided into two main actions, the first aimed to denounce the abandonment of a number of buildings in the city of Milan. A quote from Macao's press release clarifies the meaning of this first action (cf. Image 4):

Imagine that we feel naked, but we have nonetheless the strength to speak, to write, to point at, to enlarge the meshes of this fabric and to blow up its contradictions.<sup>76</sup>



Image 4. Macao activists during the “Non è mica la luna” campaign, first action.

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<sup>76</sup> [http://www.macaomilano.org/piazza\\_macao/diario/articoli/2013/07/19/nonemicalaluna-2/](http://www.macaomilano.org/piazza_macao/diario/articoli/2013/07/19/nonemicalaluna-2/)



Image 5. “Non è mica la luna” campaign, second action.

Image 5 is one of the photos that composes the second part of the action, which consisted on writing on the abandoned buildings’ walls the amount of cubic metres subtracted from the city: An excerpt from the press releases states:

Towers, buildings, abandoned areas: the strong deed to leave a mark on these places is meant to expose the physical dimension of the subtraction of space that, until today, was repressed. But the city does not end with abandonment or speculation; it’s the possible space for dreams, represents a geography of desires. Places become then much more than their walls, their matter; they are symbols and they open imaginaires. «Non è mica la luna» is the tale of these two cities: the one of abandonment and the one of desire. The first has to be revealed, the second must be staged.<sup>77</sup>

Different elements in this campaign are of interest as regards understanding Macao’s organizational model. In the first place, the campaign was based on a compulsive work rate, since the news of the Ligresti family arrest happened on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July and the campaign was on the social networks and Macao’s website 36 hours later. It was radically inclusive: every sub-group of Macao felt compelled to give their contribution to a shared and desired goal. Furthermore, it was highly participative and was mediated not just by the assembly but by the online WordPress platform, as well as mailing lists. The drive of the campaign can be identified in a desiring mechanic sustained by small groups who attempt

<sup>77</sup> [http://www.macaomilano.org/piazza\\_macao/diario/articoli/2013/07/19/nonemicalaluna-1/](http://www.macaomilano.org/piazza_macao/diario/articoli/2013/07/19/nonemicalaluna-1/)

to contaminate others. I personally witnessed the meeting prior to the second action where, at 2 am, it was decided to go and actually write on the buildings with white paint. The number of people willing to participate was so high (around 20 people) that a cap had to be imposed allowing only the people strictly necessary (six people) to perform the job, in order to avoid attracting too much attention from the police patrolling the streets of Milan. Finally, the campaign showed an outward orientation to the extent that it was not about taking care of Macao's own space any more but it was rather about taking care of the city.

To conclude the analysis of this empirical case in which relations were embedded I will look at the interplay with its discursive emergence, which, in this particular case, allows us to say something more about leadership in Macao. Following the arrests of the Ligresti family, the Italian justice minister had been under immense pressure to resign over claims that she had interfered with the transfer out of prison of financier Giulia Ligresti, the daughter of the real estate magnate.<sup>78</sup> What happened next is that Macao, who since its forced eviction from the Torre Galfa suspected the Ministry itself backed the entire operation in order to favour the interests of the owners, found in its archives footage that showed a police officer openly stating that the eviction was being carried out because of "orders from the top", referring to the minister herself. The footage was released on YouTube<sup>79</sup> and triggered a chain reaction, attracting the attention of two national broadcasters who eventually invited Macao to contribute to their prime time shows, which were covering the Ligresti affair. In the assembly that was called to discuss this situation a problem was raised concerning who should have represented Macao and voiced their critique. The natural choice was Emanuele, one of Macao's founders who had been considerably more exposed to media than others, but another activist openly challenged what he felt was a hegemonic position. Emanuele's leadership on this matter was questioned but, in the end, based on an evaluation of his greater depth of study of the issue, plus his previous experience as a speaker, granted him a renewed, but still temporary leadership, until a further questioning.

These two cases, which represent two ways in which Macao acts and in which relations are implicated in very different ways, are summarized in the following table:

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<sup>78</sup> Cf. *Financial Times* article: <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/2025e524-51f7-11e3-8c42-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3f2terY29>.

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MuldQWuOQ5U>.

<i>Rebuilding the rooftop</i>	<i>«Non è mica la luna» campaign</i>
Slow work rate	Dynamic and compulsive work rate
Social division of labour	Inclusion of everyone
Planned Activity	Eventful Activity
Face-to-face coordination and personal social media	Highly participative and mediated by the common platform and the assembly
Drive: material need sustained by a consensual agreement in the assembly	Drive: desire sustained by small groups who try to contaminate others
Inward orientation (taking care of their “home”)	Outward orientation (taking care of the city)

Before we deal with how such different relational modes can co-exist, I will briefly trace a genealogy of Macao’s cooperation. In the first instance, one major element pushing the Macao activists to act in such a particularly cooperative way is a critique of the existing relations in the creative industries in which many of the Macao activists live and work. Nevertheless, such a critique does not result in a paralyzing effect, as happened in the previous wave of mobilization on precarity (cf. 1.5). A different contribution comes from the actors’ artistic backgrounds. As we know from Howard Becker (1984) and Bourdieu (1996) art is intrinsically a collective and social activity and seldom is the result of an isolated genius. However, what made possible the complex and collective “living work of art” that is Macao, was the experience of Torre Galfa (cf. Chapter 3). The solidarity sparked in those early days is still, according to Macao activists, the main source of trust and mutual cooperation. This point is close to the argument put forth by Judith Butler in her essay “Bodies in Alliance” about Tahrir Square (Butler 2011). Another element derives from the post-workerist tradition, which has deeply influenced Macao (cf. 1.5). To elaborate on this it is interesting to read a quote from the first book published by a small and independent publisher, recently founded by three Macao activists. The book is by Maurizio Lazzarato and it deals with Duchamp’s peculiar refusal of work:

The anthropology of workers’ refusal is anchored to an anthropology of labour [...] while the idle action (founded on the *otium* of the ancient) undermines the foundations of the work, it shakes not only the identity of the manufacturer, but also their sexual assignments. What is at stake is the anthropology of modernity: the subject, the individual, the liberty of men, the universality of men. (Lazzarato 2014: 15; my translation)



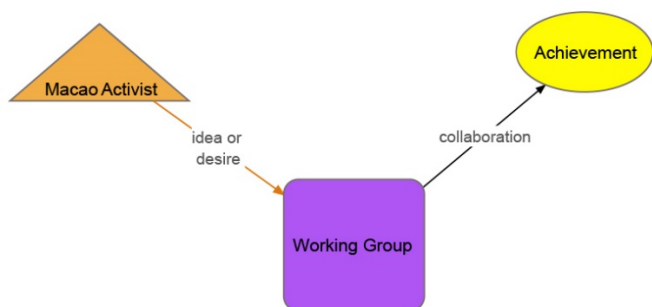
This is deeply connected with the substantial import of feminist theory within Macao. In particular in the “politics of difference”, a movement of subtraction and creation at the same time, based on the work by the feminist movements of the 1970 on relations (cf. Lonzi 1978). The strong presence of women in the construction of Macao has moulded the movement’s forms of action, giving essential importance to the quality of exchange rather than the result it is desired to attain, thus affirming the crisis of the whole business management ideology. This ideology is widespread in many projects of self-entrepreneurship in the creative industries (Bandinelli and Arvidsson, 2013) with which Macao has established a non-dogmatic dialogue, unlike its predecessors – such as the social centres that have been active in Milan since the early 1980s. A further contribution comes from the work of Alberto Melucci, and his insights about the specificity of women’s contributions to social movements. In the excerpt I produce below he is referring specifically to the feminist movements of the 1970s, but I find his analysis fits perfectly with the feminine sensitivity embodied in Macao.

“Female” activities within the movement consist of pointless meetings, writing for its own sake not for the market, apparently aimless communication, and time spent in ways incoherent with utility and efficiency. The cultivation of memory; the search for the margins, nuances, and seams of experience; and the duplication of the same activities by a myriad of groups, with complete disregard for economies of scale, are all aspects that the dominant masculine culture judges as “senseless”. Nevertheless, it is this waste that breeds innovation, as recent years have shown. (Melucci 1994: 120-1)

#### 4.6 Findings

The first finding is related to what I define as a *non-exclusive dialectic* between the individual and the collective, which places Macao’s relational pattern beyond the two main available frames of collective and connective action. Through the results of the enquiry presented in this chapter we can see how individual desires and needs are welcomed and find their expression in a dynamic interaction which does not always entail the approval of the assembly (cf. mode 4), similarly to what happens with the tasks carried out by the working groups. Furthermore, such desires arise both from people who are already active in Macao and from people who enter Macao for the first time.

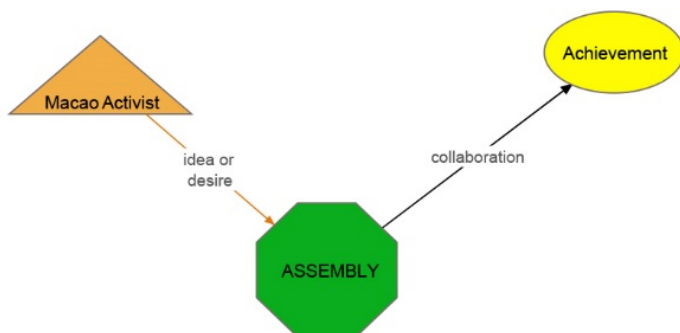
**Mode 1. Macao activist through Working Group**



**Mode 1.1 Working Group activates individual Macao activist**



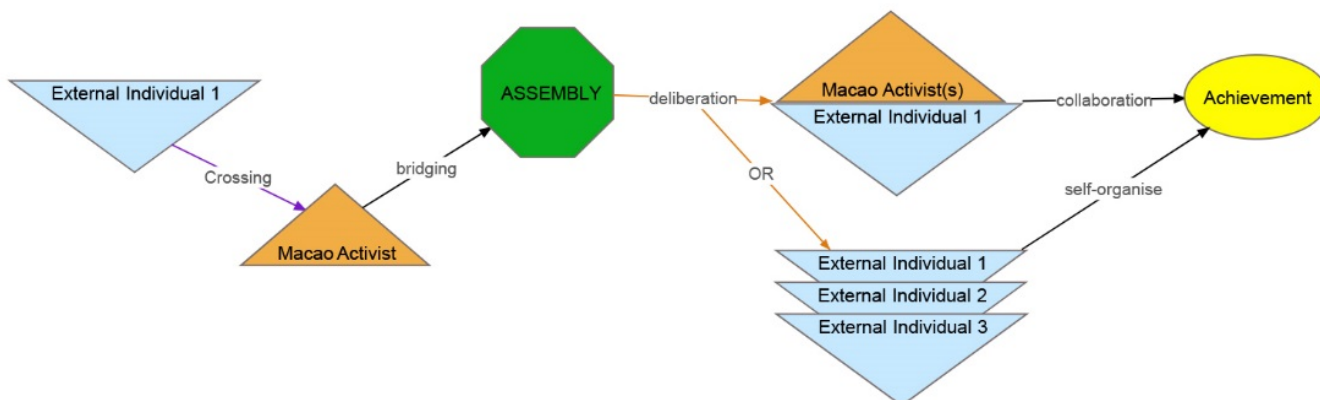
**Mode 2. Macao activist through Assembly**



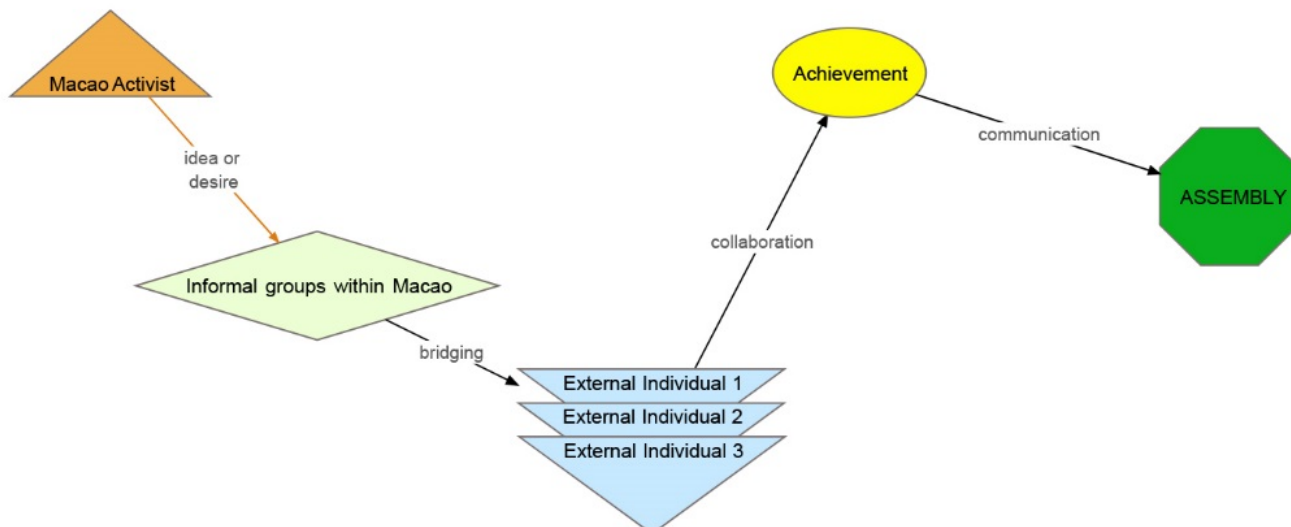
**Mode 2.1 Assembly activates individual Macao activist**



**Mode 3. External individual crosses Macao**



**Mode 4. Informal contamination without deliberation including insiders and outsiders**



The coordination in Macao does not take place in the way that it does within institutions such as unions. Coordination in Macao is a mobile, open and conflicting network in which the different types of associations (the working groups, assemblies, alliances, friendships, etc.) constitute spaces for the discussion, and the production, of skills, behaviours and expressions in constant transformation. Both the reproduction of the beliefs and moral principles that are derived from the public opinion of the majority and the most innovative political and aesthetic practices find their place here. How, then, has this model been imagined and implemented? Three main elements come together in the explanation. As I have highlighted in the genealogy of Macao's cooperation, previous experiences and orientations inspired the model in the first place: art as a social activity, feminism, post-workerist tradition and the "Galfa effect". Secondly, the ongoing experimentations brought about by Macao in its activity constantly generated new crossings<sup>80</sup> by other subjects and ideas (cf. Mode 3). Finally, these different models of organizing relations are able to co-exist in the same space because of a *desired instability*, which – paradoxically – constitutes a "sound floor" on which activities are based. Instability is a feature that characterizes many organizations nowadays, both within and outside the realm of social movements, and it does not represent an unintended negative outcome of systemic dysfunctions. As Chiappello and Boltanski (2005) have highlighted, capitalism itself has drawn ideas from counter-cultures and implemented them in new management theories. In Macao's case, however, there has been a step forward. Insofar as there is a shared awareness of being already subsumed into the neoliberal capitalist mode of production, the reflexive desire to have an unstable organization represents the outcome of a process of political subjectification in which the refusal of work (Lazzarato 2014) appears as a key component. Rather than being a hegemonic – and thus naturalized and pre-reflexive – frame for Macao, the desire to be unstable constitutes a safeguard from self-exploitation.

The second finding deals with the organization of participation along the opposed and co-existing notions of horizontality and hierarchy. In Macao there is a constantly shifting equilibrium of radical inclusion and leadership. On the one hand, radical inclusion is granted by the "crossings" by other subjects and groups that Macao, as a process and as a space, empirically supports by having, for instance, a weekly assembly that is fully open. Regardless of their status – individual, group, acting inside or outside Macao – everyone in these assemblies is welcome and is granted a space in which it is possible to propose ideas and

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<sup>80</sup> Crossing is a translation of the Italian word "attraversamento", to pass through. In Macao's lexicon, the "crossing" is a key concept representing their responsibility to leave Macao open to be permeated by third subjects as well as the enrichment deriving from it.

collaborations. However, this does not necessarily imply agreeing dogmatically with horizontality. In fact, leadership, and not leaders, represents a concrete reality in the activities of Macao, as has been substantiated in the second case study. As Simon Western (2014) has suggested, in many contemporary movements leadership is not just *de facto* already in place, it is an unavoidable and beneficial feature of every human grouping, as anarchists in the first place have also acknowledged. In Western's account it was exactly an unwillingness to recognize leadership in movements like Occupy and Indignados that caused growing dissatisfaction among activists and led to their dissolution. What is different in Macao, then? As I have stressed in the first finding, desire<sup>81</sup> is actively pursued and given free-rein so that it can permeate assemblies or, in other cases, simply ignore them and bypass them. Furthermore, there is a strong recognition of individual qualities and differences. Different forms of leadership are simultaneously co-present as they are disseminated in the social body of Macao, leading projects that might involve highly diverse skills and interests (e.g. organizing a theatre festival vs. a seminar on free software).

The fourth and main finding relates to the overall organizational model of Macao. In the previous chapter I have highlighted how the event represented a fundamental logic that guided the Macao activists' political action in the public sphere. I have also stressed how it contained a deep ambivalence, especially to the extent that the threshold separating a staged event from a disruptive event, a media event from a more authentic event that is bodily and emotionally perceived, is very thin. This ambivalence is still present and the event seems to play a role in the mechanics that govern the organization of Macao. From this point of view, the event is the minimal unit which compels activists to cooperate within a just-in-time regime of production that appears all too close to the regimes experienced by less politicized cultural workers. Within a framework that is characterized by a desiring and desired instability, however, events offer a manageability that leaves room for a critique of work beyond self-exploitation, as highlighted by the slow work rate that defines many of Macao's activities (cf. Case Study 1). Furthermore, what must be considered is the fact that the current Italian political arena<sup>82</sup> is not capable of mediating the needs originating from art and cultural workers, as traditional collective actors appear unfit and unwilling to represent them, thus leaving a gap to be filled. Such a gap has been occupied by hybrid organizations that bear the heritage of both social movements, artistic avant-gardes and workers' movements, like Macao and many others around Italy and Europe. If, traditionally, action was structured around organizations producing events (e.g. trade unions calling for a general strike or a

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<sup>81</sup> A fundamental keyword within Macao, it originates from the adoption of a Deleuzian and Spinozian frame.

<sup>82</sup> In this respect the cases of Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece appear to be substantially different.

rally), if the main economic system is centred around the event economy, if access to power through institutionalization (e.g. becoming a union) or cooptation is not either feasible or desirable anymore, if the only means available to change capitalism are from within (since there is no outside), what happens to the concept of organization for this type of hybrid movements? In this context, as highlighted by the experience of Macao, the appropriation of a capitalist logic for political purposes requires us to rethink organization as we are used to conceive of it (that is, an organization that produces events) and rather to think of it as a linking of events. In other words, as the event becomes a key organizational device, the new organization is not any more a unity that produces events in order to persist with its structures and roles, but becomes itself a series of events that loosely interweave the organization of action and production.



## Chapter 5

### Producing Culture in the Neo-liberal City

#### 5.1 Introduction

Due to the decline of manufacturing-based production as the engine of urban development, culture and creativity have become a common means of promoting urban economy and growth. Instead of promoting bottom-up individual creativity, creating the conditions for a more democratic and open culture, or supporting cultural social innovation (André, Brito Enriques, and Malheiros, 2009; Chatterton, 2000; Colbert, 2011; d'Ovidio and Pradel, 2013; Peck, 2005; Pratt, 2011; Vicari Haddock, 2010; Vivant, 2013), urban governments have implemented neo-liberal cultural policies oriented towards instrumentally using culture to revitalize and to promote the city in the global arena. This paper explores activism among cultural operators in urban social movements (Mayer, 2009), focusing in particular on their capacity to produce an alternative cultural model to that of the *creative city*.

Notwithstanding the harsh criticism that has emerged within the academic world, neo-liberal cultural policies have largely been put into practice in most European and US cities, and, after 10 years, the creative city model has betrayed its promises. Creative and cultural operators often do not recognize themselves in the policies proposed in their name, as alternative, avant-garde culture is still at the margins—the production and promotion of culture is mainly directed to the middle class, and a large segment of creative labour is living in precarious and insecure conditions (Harvey, 2012; McLean, 2014; Novy and Colomb, 2013). As McRobbie claims, “the creative sector finds itself full of young people who are burnt out, exhausted, unable to consider having children, and often self-exploiting on the basis of the ‘pleasure in work’ factor” (2011, p. 33).

Cities are increasingly transformed by immaterial economy, new patterns of consumption and gentrification (Zukin, 1991, 1995). Arts, and culture in general, have been systematically used in order to revamp the urban environment and to promote neighbourhood development into new marketable places, where the art scene has been exploited by economic forces (Bonet, Colbert and Courchesne, 2011; Kirchberg and Kagan, 2013; Lloyd, 2006). Nevertheless, the promotion of urban growth through culture is achieved with high social costs: there are conflicts among populations, and with an increase in the value of real estate comes the displacement of artists and disadvantaged people (Zukin, 1989). Public spaces are affected by a particular kind of cultural colonization that is obtained through forms

of urban marketing and consumption, and that lead to a gradual loss of the publicness of public spaces themselves.

Regarding the complex relation between capital and the cultural or art sphere, Harvey recognizes that “the problem for capital is to find ways to co-opt, subsume, commodify and monetize such cultural differences just enough to be able to appropriate monopoly rents there from” (Harvey, 2012, p. 110). Harvey makes a step forward and has hypothesized that the more neo-liberal cities exploit art and culture, the more people involved in art and culture themselves tend to oppose such an instrumentalization: “the widespread though usually fragmented struggles that exist between capitalistic appropriation and past and present cultural creativity can lead a segment of the community concerned with cultural matters to side with a politics opposed to multinational capitalism” (*ibid.*: 111).

Criticisms and political resistance are rather common within the art sphere (Borén and Young, 2013; Kirchberg and Kagan, 2013); however, they have recently emerged also within the larger realm of the cultural industries (see Grodach and Silver, 2012, for numerous examples). It is not only artists who are now involved in opposing the neo-liberal city – opponents also include exactly those people to whom neo-liberal urban policies are directed: the so-called 'creative class' is aware of the politics of exploitation of culture (Peck, 2005) and refuses most of the actions that are formulated in its name (Novy and Colomb, 2013). These kinds of protest often reach a larger scale and can be recognized as urban social movements: starting from small-scale issues or much more narrowly focused aims, they tend to enlarge and address larger issues linked to urban politics more generally, and they look for support from other social movements in the city (Mayer, 2009; Pradel and Martí-Costa, 2012). The NiON (Not in Our Name) movement represents a clear example: it is a collective of creative professionals and activists, which, in November 2009, published a manifesto entitled “Not in Our Name” denouncing the use and instrumentalization of arts, culture and creativity in urban policies in Hamburg, Germany (Novy and Colomb, 2013).

## **5.2 Alternative forces as cultural producers in the creative city**

Cities are often addressed as privileged sites for arts and culture, as, on the one hand, they promote and organize culture production and consumption, and, on the other, they accommodate some elements of structural instability that can nourish the local creative atmosphere. As Bertacchini and Santagata claim, elements of revolution are important for the creative atmosphere of a given place. Moreover, the actors in such transformations are



often groups that present themselves as extraneous to the local history and context (Bertacchini and Santagata, 2012).

Alternative, underground culture has a strong role in feeding the creative industries, and close links are built between mainstream knowledge (re)production and underground creativity (Krätke, 2012; Leslie and Rantisi, 2011; Niessen, 2009; Pruijt, 2004; Vivant, 2009). Vivant, for instance (2009), uses a semantic pattern that opposes the “off” culture to the “in” one. While the in is organized and planned, the off is often said to be spontaneous and opportunist; it is free of any constraints, and so become extremely creative and innovative. In the case of the theatre festival in Avignon Vivant shows how, little by little, the off becomes the real festival: the place to show and to be, the real engine of the festival that attracts more people and more artists until a new off of the off appears.

Pruijt, in his examination of squatting activities in Amsterdam, maintains that policymakers tend to recognize the squatting artists’ workspaces as venues for cultural activities, and therefore as extremely valuable elements for the city. This leads to connections between the squatter scene and the local administration (Pruijt, 2013). The Municipality of Amsterdam invested more than €40 million in the Breeding Places Amsterdam (BPA) project in 1999 (Pruijt, 2004; Uitermark, 2004), aimed at sustaining the local cultural production with space and workshop provision.

Within the (neo-liberal) European city, the “alternative”, underground, subcultural culture represents a scene that renders the urban space as attractive, not only for urban tourists and city users but also, and more importantly, for investors in urban regeneration programmes. Cultural milieus represent an asset, both in general cultural terms (for marketing, attracting tourists) and especially in terms of real estate and urban development, as “they are charged with cultural capital which in the scheme of creative city policy becomes transformed by investors into economic capital” (Mayer, 2013, p. 4). Cultural scenes, emerging from alternative or underground culture, are exploited as a branding asset that show how cool and “authentic” (Zukin, 2009) the city is. Therefore,

neo-liberal urban policies on the one hand manage to incorporate alternative and subcultural activism including the creativity of squatters (who, in the process, may find it difficult to maintain their political autonomy), while on the other they entail intensifying repressive strategies, stricter laws, tougher policing, and hence more evictions and fiercer criminalization of squatting. (Mayer, 2013, p. 5).

Paradoxically, even the activities of the most alternative and antagonistic cultural fringes end up contributing to gentrification of neighbourhoods, as cultural policy overlaps more and more with programmes of urban regeneration (Pratt, 2011)

### **5.3 Aim and methodology**

Taking as its frame the idea of activism against the creative city model, the paper focuses on political mobilization by cultural workers in Milan, Italy, performed by Macao and opposed to the local cultural policies.

This case is analyzed with the aim of understanding to what extent Macao represents a real alternative to the neo-liberal articulation of the creative city in Milan. On the one hand, I ask whether Macao is a political actor that is able to influence the local cultural policy, and to what extent it is included in the urban governance of Milan. Related questions concern Macao's claims and expectancies, and its possible process of normalization. On the other hand, I evaluate Macao's role in the cultural milieu at different levels (local, national, international).

I explored Macao by way of a qualitative analysis: a long ethnography with in-depth interviews was carried out from May 2012 onwards. Furthermore, a questionnaire was circulated to Macao activists: I collected 15 answers from about 30 key members of the organization. Questions in the questionnaire were mostly open, and related to Macao's capacity to promote culture in the city of Milan.

### **5.4 Milan cultural strategies**

Milanese cultural policy follows the neo-liberal model based on city-consumerism and branding. It focuses on large and mass-participation events, which should attract many people into town, and is not really aimed at promoting young or emerging artists, or even at looking at avant-garde production. This is even more remarkable because, in particular in the 1950s and 1960s, the city hosted one of the largest artistic communities in Europe, with artists such as Manzoni or Fontana, or Burri, representing the peak of international art in that period. Cultural policies have been criticized for being elitists and event-centred (Alfieri, 2009), supporting domesticated and mainstream proposals with the aim of producing big popular events.

The adoption of a narrative linked to creativity in Milan was also one of the causes of the sterilization of most cultural realities based on heterogeneity and diversity, as shown by the eviction of most of the so-called *centri sociali* (Squatting Europe Kollektive, 2013). In Italy *centri sociali* (autonomous cultural squatted centres) developed around the end of the 1970s,

as a manifestation of radical left movements. In Milan during the 1980s *centri sociali* experienced a great expansion, exactly in the period in which the Municipality was implementing a set of urban policies that were designed to build an image of the city based on luxury, and the design and fashion industry. By the 1990s *centri sociali* became a real breeding ground for young, productive and talented workers, being urban workshops of experimental creative professions in music, cinema, the web, software, interactive design and so on. Such places even became very common touristic attractions for young people passing through Milan. All the cultural and creative production that resulted from these places was obviously opposed to the normalized branding of Milan, and often the cultural production was a tool which was used to carry out political action (Gill and Pratt, 2008). Today, such places have been either removed or normalized, because they have not been able to adapt to the new city's brand ideals. Many protagonists of that scene became successful creative professionals (often co-opted by the economic forces they were fighting against) – mainly abroad, since as a large part this “creative class” of yesteryear had been pushed away from Milan.

In general, the Milanese cultural system is often accused of being close-minded and incapable of valorizing local resources: “almost everything in art is private, self-organized” (Fucking Good Art, 2012, p. 25). Artists and commentators criticize the lack of institutional funds for the art sphere, which forces artists to respond to market logic and limits experimentation and the avant-garde (Agosti, 2010). The city holds a very large and valuable artistic heritage, such as private galleries, exhibition centres and independent associations, but the many projects in the city aimed at connecting them in a cultural system have always failed.

The present Municipal Council was elected in spring 2012, and, as a progressive coalition among left-wing parties, it represents a strong break with the former right-wing governments that had been leading the city for many decades. Generally speaking, the new Council claims to adopt a more democratic and pluralist governance structure, one that is receptive to civil society and to bottom-up initiatives. Nevertheless, an assessment of this political strategy is difficult at the moment, as very few researchers have yet published analyses of it (see, for instance, Angelucci, Barberis, and Kazepov, 2014).

### **5.5 Is Macao an alternative answer to the “creative city”?**

Macao was born during the winter of 2011/12, as a part of “*Lavoratori dell'Arte*” (Art Workers), a group of artists, art critics, curators, journalists and activists who had been politically active in Milan since the previous autumn. Macao defines itself as the “New Centre for Arts, Culture and Research of Milan”. In the first phase of its existence it was an idea in

the making. This idea became visible in April 2012, in the form of a Twitter profile, a YouTube channel and a Tumblr site<sup>83</sup>. Macao only became an open space for citizens to experiment with new modalities of art, culture and research in May 2012, when hundreds of cultural workers occupied an empty skyscraper (Torre Galfa) in the centre of Milan. They were evicted some days after the occupation, and a few weeks later, they managed to occupy a former slaughterhouse and moved there<sup>84</sup>.

#### *Macao within the political arena*

Does Macao constitute an answer to the neo-liberal articulation of the cultural policies in Milan? Is it an example of an open, bottom-up, innovative culture? Is it included in urban governance, such that it can influence the local cultural policies? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to trace Macao's genealogy. If we look at the past, we can consider Macao as a peculiar combination of distinct histories of Italian mobilization.

The first history, more strictly political, relates to the wide field of the Italian radical left movement that is also linked to the experiences of the *centri sociali* as previously described. Since the early 2000s, this movement was particularly active around the themes of *precarity* (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008), developing innovative political actions, combining an autonomist political culture with a highly creative and innovative repertoire of action (Mattoni, 2012).

The second historical trend that led to the development of Macao is connected to mobilizations in which artists were directly involved. In this respect, pivotal has been the experience of struggles against gentrification brought about in Isola, a formerly working class neighbourhood in Milan, which underwent a strong and harsh process of de-industrialization and gentrification. The artistic mobilization (many participants in which are also part of the Macao movement) denounced the interests of speculators, building a particular artistic narration called *fight-specific* involving many inhabitants of the Isola neighbourhood.

Finally, a third important connection in the history of Macao is the very recent network of activists in Italy. In 2008–09, a movement emerged among Italian art workers that denounced the scarcity of public funds for the arts and the precariousness of jobs within the cultural economy. In 2011, this movement organized the Italian National Network of Occupied Theatres<sup>85</sup> which was established after a large and very successful occupation in Rome in

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<sup>83</sup> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/MacaoTwit>; YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/user/wmacao>; Tumblr: <http://wmacao.tumblr.com/>.

<sup>84</sup> For an accurate analysis of the subjectification of Macao as a political actor through the use of art see Valli, 2015.

<sup>85</sup> <http://www.lavoroculturale.org/imprudenza/>.

April 2011, where activists also aimed to give another (cultural) life to those spaces (see also Giorgi, 2014).

Macao presents itself as a reality,<sup>86</sup> whose main constituency is composed of culture and knowledge workers. Macao's activists are not the "usual squatters" or typical political activists. They are, on average, 34 years old; they hold a university degree and work under precarious contracts in the artistic or knowledge sector. Notwithstanding their presence in the labour market (as their jobs are precarious, Macao's activists are often involved in more than one activity), on average people devoted around 33 hours a week to the project.<sup>87</sup>

Looking specifically at the governance of the Milanese cultural sector and the influence of Macao on the local cultural policies, we can see that, in the early days of the Galfa Tower occupation, the Milanese Municipality adopted a strategy of recognition and normalization at the same time. Indeed Macao was offered the use of a very large space, owned by the Municipality, on the condition that Macao became a formal association. The interest shown by the Municipality was mainly due to the success of the occupation and the partial overlapping of the demands raised by Macao with the city council's political programme. At any rate, if the local government recognized Macao, it also aimed to normalize it. Macao rejected the proposal, claiming instead the right of spontaneous groups of citizens to self-govern the urban commons, outside of the framework of any top-down legitimization. Secondly, Macao refused the Municipality's offer because it did not want to be opposed to, and be ostracized by, the numerous cultural associations of the city that, for many years, have been claiming a space from the Municipality.

A second phase started when, in June 2012, Macao activists occupied the former stock-exchange of the municipal slaughterhouse, shortly after their eviction from the Galfa Tower.<sup>88</sup> The building, a perfect example of Art Nouveau in Milan, is publicly owned, and is located in a semi-peripheral area of the city. Despite their formally illegal status, the local government silently tolerates Macao's presence, allowing Macao to find resources to undertake cultural and artistic production.

Finally, in the early summer of 2014, a new phase began. The Municipality established a negotiating table in order to deal with abandoned spaces owned by the Municipality that could be used for social purposes. The aim of the negotiating table is to find ways to include informal associations or autonomous realities or collectives in the decisional process on the

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<sup>86</sup> The term *reality* is here used to differentiate Macao from other squatting movements (namely the *centri sociali*) that are usually called "collectives".

<sup>87</sup> Data source: internal survey conducted by Macao itself, [http://issuu.com/macao milano/docs/69300\\_ore](http://issuu.com/macao milano/docs/69300_ore).

<sup>88</sup> After Torre Galfa, Macao also occupied, and was immediately evicted from, an historical villa in the very centre of the city.

urban commons. Indeed, despite the numerous evictions in the 1990s and early 2000s there are still a number of squatted places in Milan. Some of these are part of the cultural and political history of the city; some have been occupied for only a few years or even months. Nevertheless, the Municipality, with the aim of acknowledging both the lack of public space for cultural and political activities in the city, and the cultural value of such movements, invited all the squatting realities in the city to the negotiating table, together with formal and institutionalized associations. Most of the autonomous organizations refused to negotiate. Only a few, including Macao, accepted.

The attention given by the Municipality to the emerging bottom-up forces that shape the city is the outcome of a long process of valuing of the commons that has been taking place in Italy since the early 2000s. This process has included a national debate (and referendum) about the privatization of the water supply, and important discussions about public spaces in many Italian cities. Within the Milanese context, Macao members have been involved in this debate since its beginning and they have been very keen to raise such issues explicitly in the negotiations.

This negotiating table constitutes a major shift in the city's governance – at least in its founding premises, if not in its results (which are still undefined). It does not simply constitute an attempt to negotiate formally with squatters; it is a way to include grassroots organizations directly in urban policy-making. Moreover, Macao was able to ensure that the table adopted the “*istruttoria pubblica*” legislative tool: through this tool, citizens can directly contribute, to express their stances and, with the support of municipal lawyers, transform them into a draft law that the city council is expected to discuss and vote upon. At this negotiating table Macao's goal is firstly that of being recognized as an autonomous and not-institutionalized subject able, nonetheless, to be legitimized in the public arena. Secondly, the use of the space is at stake of the negotiation table. If the first aim has already been reached, as the table has been set, the second objective is still very far from being achieved, as the negotiation is still going on.

#### *Macao within the creative milieu*

The second dimension of our analysis concerns Macao's cultural offering. This is part of our attempt to understand if, and to what extent, Macao constitutes an effective answer to the creative city in terms of cultural production. In almost three years of activity, Macao has organized or hosted hundreds of events, including live events (music, performing arts), exhibitions, talks and cultural/artistic festivals. This demonstrates the know-how possessed

by Macao activists in terms of event organization, and it makes clear the need for such a space in Milan. Macao's events vary considerably in qualitative terms: one can find more experimental and avant-garde forms of art (e.g. poetry readings) together with music (e.g. a concert of a famous Italian folk singer) or cultural events (e.g. a talk by Richard Stallman) that are capable of gathering large crowds. Macao hosts events organized directly by itself, co-organized in partnership with other entities – institutions, associations, or single individuals – or directed and managed entirely by “external” actors.<sup>89</sup> In addition, the public is involved to different degrees in the events, as they can be part of a more traditional audience or be more involved in workshops or even in the co-creation of performances. In the case of events organized by external actors, Macao acts as a curator, and gives particular attention to guaranteeing not necessarily the artistic quality of the artwork, but the quality of the process. An example will help to clarify this: if an amateur painter wants to exhibit his/her pictures he/she would never be allowed to do so if the quality of the artworks is bad; but if an association of elderly people in the neighbourhood organizes the exposition of recycled chairs, Macao helps them and hosts the event, because it shares the social aims of the event. This wide spectrum of cultural offering has been, by itself, part of the political project of Macao since its inception. Activists often refer to the concept of *crossings*, that implies that the space of Macao must be open, so that it can be freely crossed, and activists deem themselves responsible for ensuring the space is open. Similarly, on the idea of *publics*, Macao criticizes the city's cultural offering as being an event economy; instead it calls for a redefinition of the role of citizens in cultural events, as a more active and involved public. Therefore, when seeking to understand if and how Macao constitutes a space that is able to contribute to a more pluralistic urban cultural offering, we must acknowledge Macao's practice of including instances, desires and projects that otherwise would not find any space in the city. Reacting against the paradigm of the creative city, Macao's effort is to try to give visibility and legitimacy to “other” forms of culture – and to *make* culture, also in terms of new organizational and productive processes.

To what extent are Macao members embedded in the artistic scene at different levels?<sup>90</sup>

According to the survey answers, almost all of the respondents are knowledge and creative workers, some of them are pure artists, or define themselves as such. Nevertheless, very few of them are able to sustain themselves with their artistic activities and, for the most part, they have at least two different jobs. Macao is for them a very precious environment, as it provides

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<sup>89</sup> For instance out of a total of 270 events in 2013, around 60% were produced by Macao itself, while 40% were co-organized with external actors.

<sup>90</sup> Most of the information presented in this section derives from data collected via the questionnaires we circulated in the summer of 2014.

a necessary space, in the first instance, for the activists themselves to channel their desires and creativity beyond the market and its logic. It is commonly the case that, among the diverse tasks each activist carries out, there is also some part that coincides with their profession, with their “day” job. Participating in Macao represents an opportunity not just to satisfy an ingenuous need to dance outside a proper theatre or to do video editing for a political cause rather than a corporation: it is about an affective and material investment that activists make in order to create an alternative model of cultural production. Asked to list the three most significant cultural or artistic projects in their careers, almost two thirds of respondents stated that these took place within Macao, or were possible thanks to it. For instance one interviewee stated: “[Macao] allowed me to realize my wishes that I organized autonomously”, or, again, another one claims: “[I could do it only in Macao] because a person who is not an artist [like the interviewee] wouldn’t have the opportunity to perform elsewhere”.

Nevertheless, Macao is also more than this: it provides the chance to cooperate with leading figures in the cultural sector, and it sustains their autonomous projects with inspirations, ideas and relations, as it represents a hub within the broader artistic system. Indeed, regarding Macao and its activists’ inclusion in the national and international art circuits, the data shows that some key members have had commitments in the art system, including in art academies, biennales and contemporary art museums in Italy (MACRO – MAXXI) and abroad (MACBA, MG Ljubljana). Such commitments support, but also help to explain, the wider network built by Macao. Key members’ participation in the wider cultural and artistic scene represents a very important resource, in term of networking, for other less connected members. For instance: “[Macao has been crucial for my artistic career] because it eased the meetings with customers and people from the cultural word” or “I got in touch with the acting company [...] thanks to their links with Macao”. The following answer is extremely evocative of the importance of Macao as an open window on the cultural scene:

Without Macao, it would be difficult to collaborate with internationally known professionals and artists, as Luca Bigazzi (director of photography working with many important Italian directors) or the Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards’ Workcenter. It is exciting to work, although underpaid, with those people whose artworks I have studied in my schoolbooks. These are the reasons why we are happy about the investments in Macao.

Indeed, the events organized in Macao are generally the outcome of the wide network (national and international) of which Macao activists are a part, and show that the centre is



clearly recognized by the art system. Nevertheless, the relationship between Macao and the official contemporary art system in Milan (mainly private galleries) is controversial. On the one hand, the strong political commitment of the Macao activists and artists seems to be the reason for the failure of cooperative projects between Macao and a number of important Milanese art galleries. On the other hand, Macao, from its very beginning, has been engaging in fertile partnerships within the sub-field of contemporary art, which combine reflexivity, criticism and activism.

## 5.5 Conclusions

The chapter has focused on Macao's mobilization, which aimed to offer a stage for a different, open, bottom-up culture in the city of Milan. Our starting point is that in Western cities urban policies aimed at creating a so-called *creative city* (a mix of cultural policies, city branding and urban renewal) aligns perfectly with the neo-liberal urban model. Such policies build an entrepreneurial city, on sale on the international market to the global middle class and to multinational corporations.

Recently, cities have hosted a new wave of urban social movements that, explicitly or not, have fought against such articulations of cultural and urban policies.

In this paper I conceive of the case of Macao under such a framework: Milan is not atypical as a creative-neo-liberal city. Macao offers a case study for understanding if, to what extent and how, creative professionals, artists and activists not only oppose the creative city, but also offer an alternative model to it.

Therefore, I analyzed Macao by asking two groups of questions: is Macao involved in the governance of the cultural sector in Milan? Is it able to influence the local cultural agenda – is it an actor involved in the process of producing policies? Secondly, I discuss whether Macao is embedded within the art world, and how it relates to it.

Macao has been explicitly mobilized against at least three outcomes of the neo-liberal creative city from its early stages: against gentrification, the precariousness of the creative workforce and the event-logic of cultural offerings.

Considering their political stances and requests, Macao was capable of translating the event economy of a creative city into an instrument of critique, adopting a logic of action based on the power – as well as the ambiguities – of the events.

It is possible to argue that Macao has, indeed, a political voice that is recognized at the local level. Macao is sitting at a negotiating table together with the Municipality, in order to define the future of empty and squatted places in the city. This negotiating table can have a role in building a new creative city, that “move[s] beyond the tourism, heritage and consumption

focus of many initiatives and [that] embrace[s] the full cycle of culture-making that includes cultural production” (Pratt, 2011, p. 129). The outcome of the table is of course totally undefined, but the very participation of Macao represents per se a very important point, as it shows that the Municipality recognizes Macao not as the (usual) squatted cultural centre, to be normalized or even evicted, but as a partner to work with regarding the future of the city.

I have explored the artistic voice of Macao within the local, Milanese, arena and within the international art world. Macao’s cultural schedule is extremely heterogeneous as it hosts very different kinds of events that are very varied in terms of artistic quality. In short, Macao fulfils three main functions: it stages different kinds of artists, it represents a crucial node in the artistic international network, and it offers a high-quality, avant-garde culture that would not be exposed in Milan otherwise.

I can conclude that, at least in its practices, Macao does represent a different option to the neo-liberal articulation of the creative city; and it does so both in the political arena and in the artistic world.

Many issues are still open, however, among which we would like to emphasize two questions that have to do with the embeddedness of Macao in the political and the economic sphere: how can Macao go beyond its squatting and illegal nature, without losing its political character? Here the important issue of normalization, institutionalization and cooptation of Macao by both the Municipality and the market arises.

Finally, Macao is certainly not devoid of contradictions. Its fight against gentrification might well result in gentrification of the area, and its cultural production models might coincide with processes of self-exploitation, with similar contradictions to those evident in vast sectors of social entrepreneurship and of the collaborative economy. In Macao, activists are conscious of such risks, but nevertheless they have decided to take the risk and have made the political choice of taking action. Furthermore, they intend to cope with these risks in different ways: for instance, in order to deal with self-exploitation, they discuss and experiment with forms of economic redistribution inspired by mutualistic ideas. What has yet to be established is if such models can be further developed into a sustainable alternative to the creative city.

## Conclusion

This thesis has tried to demonstrate how art plays a role in processes of political mobilization. Drawing on ethnographic research that combines interviews, digital methods and questionnaires. I have attempted to demonstrate how art's role in social movements cannot and should not be reduced to an instrumental or expressive one. Examining the role played by art in an artist-led mobilization like Macao made it possible to understand how art nurtures and stimulates the different fields of activity and phases of a social movement.

In Chapter 1 I highlighted how social movements have increasingly embodied a progressive approach, highlighting both the evolution of social movement practices in this direction and the parallel adoption of deliberative theories by social movements. I have also pointed out how the emerging wave of artist mobilizations differs from social movements and how a micro-sociological cultural approach to the study of social movements is ideally suited to render in greater depth the meaning-making processes. Notwithstanding the relevance of art in contentious practices, very few studies have covered the inter-linkages between art and political mobilization, especially in the debate around social movements. My work is intended to contribute to this emerging field.

In the second chapter, I presented the methodological approach I adopted in the research. In particular, I focused on my position as a researcher in the field. As the literature has highlighted, in order to render social movement research more dynamic, a single-sited ethnography is not only the most suitable method for capturing complexity, but it also constitutes a remedy for the routinization of research on social movements, which has usually been too focused on comparative studies or quantitative analysis. However, considering the peculiarity of my position in the field, in order for my qualitative research to be accountable it was necessary for it to be reflexive and take a long time-frame. Finally, I explained how digital methods have proved to be crucial in allowing a native take on the digital environment in which actors were acting and I showed the fruitful interplay between traditional ethnographic research methods and digital methods.

In Chapter 3 I delineated how art, in the first, and most intense, phase of Macao's mobilization, has led me to reconsider the explanatory power of connective logic theories that appear to be based on a paradigmatic type of explanation. Triangulating digital methods with ethnographic insight I demonstrated how theorization about social movements' logics of mobilization should also take into account the emotions and the planning that precedes the aggregation produced by social media. In fact, by adopting a pragmatic approach – that

is, focusing on the contextual meaning-making produced by actors in their situated interaction – I outlined the limits of a paradigmatic approach that privileges a concept of a highly individualized actor, neglecting the dimension of collective identity-building. In this way I was able to understand the role of artists in the planning and in the development of Macao as being a fundamental source of so-called ‘stitching mechanisms’. Thus, opting for a pragmatic concept, I have come to define the logic of Macao’s mobilization as eventful – stressing, in particular, the role of artists in re-working the event grammar that is the basis of the economic and social life (in neoliberal terms) in Milan. The event thus becomes a disruptive device that is capable of intercepting the desire and the need of a substantial part of Milanese citizenry and capable, at the same time, to grant a radical openness to the project of becoming Macao.

In the following chapter I analysed the organizational aspects of Macao, combining ethnographic insights and digital data. By focusing on the phase in which Macao’s activities and its constituency was stabilized, I was able to stress how relations become a key site of development for the movement. The findings about the organization of Macao corroborate the explanatory logic that was elaborated in the previous chapter. In particular, Macao’s mobilization confirms once more that mobilizations are born and endure not only as a result of drawing together atomized individuals thanks to an ephemeral social and political effervescence that is mediated by digital media. Rather, in the case of Macao, a core of members were capable of deploying an open organizational mechanic in which the becoming of Macao itself was the product of both individual and collective endeavours. By looking closely at mobilizations we find that what appear to be crowds to a quantitative eye become affinity groups, working groups, friendships, and temporary alliances that are bound together by a shared experience and by a common desire. Whereas horizontality has become more than a feature of recent social movements – namely, something more similar to a normative discourse – leadership and hierarchy have become something to be avoided at all costs. My research contributes to the recent discussion in this respect. In particular, I argue that openness and radical inclusion co-exist with recognized – multiple and temporary – leadership. Finally, in order to respond to external constraints and internal demands – both political and organizational – in Macao’s organization the event becomes a key organizational device. The new organization is not any more a unity that produces events in order to persist with its structures and roles, but becomes itself a series of events that loosely interweave the organization of action and production. This overall organizational form of Macao may indicate the form of future hybrid movements, in which political struggle and new forms of life and value-production co-exist.

The fifth and final chapter aimed to evaluate to what extent Macao, and the global wave of art activism more generally, constitutes an alternative to the neoliberal articulation of the creative city in Milan. On the one hand, I asked whether Macao is a political actor that is able to influence the local cultural policy and to what extent it is included in the urban governance of Milan. Related questions concern Macao's claims and expectations, and its possible process of normalization. On the other hand, I evaluated Macao's role in the cultural milieu at different levels (local, national, international).

Having explored the artistic voice of Macao, I found that it is based on an extremely heterogeneous cultural activity: Macao hosts very different kinds of events, different both in their nature (performative, musical, cultural) and in terms of their artistic quality. This is due to the fact that, as I have explored in the previous chapter, individual desires and interests often result in the activation of links and experiences that could not be managed by a centralized body as an all-overseeing assembly. In considering Macao's cultural production, which is articulated through Macao's particular political and artistic voice, I can pin down three main functions: it stages different kinds of artists; it represents a crucial node in the artistic international network; and it offers a high quality, avant-garde culture that would not otherwise be exposed in Milan. Therefore, I can conclude that Macao does represent a different option to the neoliberal articulation of the creative city; and it does so both in the political arena and in the artistic world.

Furthermore, analyzing Macao's position towards urban governance, it is possible to argue that Macao has, indeed, a political voice that is recognized at the local level. Macao sits at a negotiating table together with the Municipality in order to define the future of empty and squatted places in the city. This negotiating table may have a role in building a new creative city. Although the outcome of the table is, of course, totally undefined, Macao's very participation represents per se a relevant point, as it shows that the Municipality recognizes Macao not as the (usual) squatted cultural centre, to be normalized or even evicted, but as a partner to work with regarding the future of the city.

These three core chapters (3-4-5), each adopting a different logic, different approaches and partially drawing on different bodies of academic literature, are proof of the complexity involved in studying recent mobilizations. The approach that I have adopted in this study was intended to make it possible to understand the relationship between art and mobilization. However, in the process I have realized that mobilization is not just protest: it embodies a number of fields and elements that have to be dealt with by an interdisciplinary approach. This is why, also inspired by the findings I gathered in the field, following a grounded

approach I decided to articulate my analysis of Macao by “dividing” it into three main areas: action, relation and production. Such an approach has been useful not only in order to understand Macao’s mobilization but, as I have argued, because it may be the only way to make sense of an emergent wave of hybrid political organizations.

The mobilization of Macao is clearly a part of the wide process that has recently taken place in the art world, and that has involved political artists in particular. Connected to a widespread crisis in the job market, with jobs that are increasingly unsatisfying, their endeavour is directed towards a construction of a new meaning for life. In this sense, it is also rather difficult to insulate their being artists who engage in mobilization from their being workers trapped in the neoliberal mechanisms of just-in-time creativity. It is increasingly difficult to separate all of this from their simply being citizens, and ultimately human beings, in constant struggle regarding the redefinition of what our society should look like. It is even more difficult to separate them from what seems to be an emerging common front of struggle. A number of different groups, ranging from neo-ruralism, peer-to-peer cooperation and de-centralized currencies show interesting overlapping political sensitivities (Bollier and Conaty, 2014).

Artists have often been at the forefront of struggles: situationists were involved in May 1968, Futurists and the Russian avant-garde contributed to the shaping of deep political transformations. However, if we connect the experience of Macao that I have presented in this study with similar struggles in Austria (Graz), France (Intermittents), UK (Shake, Liberate Tate, Art Not Oil), Former West, 16 Beaver Street in New York, Occupy Wall Street (and in particular the Illuminator project), Egypt (Moisereen), what emerges is an entirely new meaning for these artist-based social movements. In each case they are not just antagonizing the status quo, or contrasting certain policies with other ones, or marginalizing themselves: rather, they are making the change, in a literal and in a material sense. In other words, they are trying to replace the welfare state and the increasingly institutionalized third sector. They reclaim a “right to the city”, but not in a self-referential way. They want to invent new ways to produce art and culture, but the main principle guiding all of these processes is that this is not aimed at an artistic self-proclamation. Discourses about authorship circulate in these spaces, but what is at stake, in more general terms, is how to establish a fruitful dialectic between the individual and the collective. As I have tried to highlight in the previous chapters, processes of political subjectification seem to play an important role in the critical appropriation of different heritages and present moments: the heritage of antagonism, of self-governing, of direct action; the present moment of networks, crowds and collaborative

practices. The appropriations of such devices, is again the process of connecting individual competences and desires in a politically driven collective process.

Most importantly, artists want to do all this, without ceasing to be artists. But what does it mean for these art-activists to be artists today? Being an artist means to serve a greater goal, to put forward the idea that precarity can be overcome with joy and the beauty of being together. I think this is the deepest and most defining thing I have found in Macao and in the other spaces I have visited. This finding might not seem to represent a sound sociological argument, but the kindness and the care for each other I have seen demonstrated by the artist-activists in these spaces is not common. Conflicts arise, but they are handled with the care of a soul that has cultivated other perspectives about how to interact with the others. In this sense, the contribution of artists to the global struggle lies in bringing forth an alternative, by making that alternative a reality, without wasting energy on conflicts which are already lost because they are fought in a deeply asymmetrical field. In this sense I see the contribution of artists to the struggle, even in Milan alone, in the interaction with other urban movements, as being capable of producing a whole new field in which to conduct the struggle. This is very close to the notion of radical imaginary conceived by Castoriadis. Very similar to Castoriadis are the other philosophical references that circulate in these artistic spaces: Spinoza, Deleuze, Guattari constitute the main philosophical references for a struggle in which the *enjeu* is no longer to storm the Winter Palace. This resonates with the major transformations that are indeed storming the ways in which we will produce and exchange. Decentralized architectures, new forms of currencies, self-governing of the commons, co-governing the city, living and not codified law – these are all processes that share with the artistic mobilization a post-dialectical frame.

The title of my dissertation, *Mobilizing Art*, aims to underline the double implication contained in the gerund. Art is mobilized by subjects and art is by itself a force, activated by artists, that mobilizes in a very peculiar way. To conclude this journey, based on my ethnography on Macao and its “surroundings”, my attempt is to pin down some of the functions that art has played in mobilization.

#### *Art as an instrument*

Although I have repeatedly called for a non-instrumental view of artistic practices in the process of political mobilization, art has also been used as tool in this mobilization. In particular, even in times of severe budget cuts to arts and culture, which is particularly perceivable in Italy, art benefits from centuries of an alleged autonomy from power. This picture has been contested by recent developments in art criticism. In addition, a superficial investigation might produce evidence that the art world – its actors, institutions and

economic models – are anything but detached from the struggles that affect societies. Nonetheless, a residual aura has remained, even in a country like Italy in which a Minister of Culture claimed that budget funds for arts and culture had to be sacrificed because “With art you cannot feed yourself”. Artists in the national mobilization of what has been defined as the Network of Occupied Theatres exploited this residue to protect their struggle, to save historical spaces and to recuperate abandoned places. More than that, they shielded smaller movements, like housing movements, whose bargaining capital with institutions was not sufficient because their struggles were simply not visible enough. By unveiling the abandonment of historical spaces and whole areas of the city, the movement has gained considerable exposure, and through that exposure it has secured important successes.

#### *Art as a set of practices*

Art is an immense repository of practices to convey symbolic meanings. Happenings, situations, performances, the figurative, the abstract, the visuals – the repertoire is practically unlimited, and it is constantly being reworked in light of new technical developments. Media art is one example of this, but in the case of Macao it also means to produce an “institutional” communication that is capable of conveying meaning through form. In this sense, what appears particularly relevant is the coupling of a high capacity to decode the complexity of the present but also the ability to produce signs that can connect with people’s experience. Particularly relevant is the path that Italian political art has taken since the 1970s: in particular from the creative wing of the autonomist movement, through the underground culture of the 1980s, cyber culture and new punk, to relational and participatory art in the 1990s. Furthermore, as I have highlighted in the previous chapters, the fundamental social and collective nature of the artistic practices, coupled with the continuity with artisanship, created the ideal conditions for a fruitful and rich collaborative political endeavour.

#### *Art as a frontier*

Recent debates on art (Whybrow 2011) highlight how we might have reached the point where everything, and yet nothing, might be art. Art has no defined boundaries, art becomes practically impossible to define. In this process of the endless pushing of disciplinary boundaries, the most interesting development in respect of artistic political involvement is artists’ becoming researchers of the contemporary society. Macao, in this respect, is probably the most advanced node of the Italian network: it experiments with cryptocurrencies and financial algorithms, and it engages directly with the most complex, yet compelling, challenges of our times.

I would like to conclude my dissertation by looking at the future, and in particular to a book that will be published in October 2015, *Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century*. This



is a 600-page volume curated by Peter Weibel for MIT Press, which brings together a number of influential thinkers. One sentence particularly caught my attention on the webpage, in which a short introduction to the book is presented:<sup>91</sup> “Activism may be the first new art form of the twenty-first century”.

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<sup>91</sup> <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/global-activism>.



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