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Pushing Border Art's Borders - session #3

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With Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary

BANDITE (artivist collective - Simona Sala and Valentina Bosio) & GABRIELE OLLINO (University of Cambridge) : WITHIN THE INTERSTICES OF

IN/VISIBILITY: BORDER ART MEETS ANTHROPOLOGY

This paper stems from the collaboration and conversations between the members of the BANDITE artistic collective (Simona Sala and Valentina Bosio) and the anthropologist Gabriele Ollino. It situates itself within the domains of political art and social anthropology, guided by an interdisciplinary perspective that merges the implementation and critical rethinking of an artistic Border Art project. Bandite's project *Presenti Mai Assenti* (Present, Never Absent) is an immersive audio-experiential walk situated in the transborder region of the Hautes Alpes, between Italy and France, along a busy migratory route. The intervention was informed by long-term participation and ethnographic research with local activist groups supporting migrant mobility. The local border area serves as a dual space: simultaneously a 'hostile terrain' (De Leon 2015), where the state militarisation and the harsh mountainous environment coalesce in a potentially deadly assemblage for undocumented migrants, and a space of leisure, attracting thousands of affluent tourists annually. In an effort to mitigate the negative impact on the local tourist infrastructure, both the French and the Italian states adopt a strategy of invisibilisation, whereby the Othered migrant body remains fundamentally absent from public perception. Our intervention, as artists and anthropologists, was an attempt to engage with this invisibilisation by raising awareness among unaware tourists and locals about the reality of this multi-layered space and its racialised hierarchies of mobility. By asking participants to walk along a cross-border path, accompanied by audio field recordings and the poetry of Italo-Somali poet Rahma Nur, the site-specific installation engaged participants on an affective level – interpreted as an embodied mode of presence and experiencing of the world – rather than aiming for representational accuracy. By engaging the senses, the project aimed to render affectively 'visible' subjects otherwise erased from public and local consciousness. Post-experiential interviews with participants showed that experiencing the immersive cross-border walk unsettled habitual perceptions, encouraging a new way of seeing and relating to space and casting unfamiliarity upon the familiar. In its political aim, the artistic project sought to encourage individual and collective action, prompting participants to pay attention to the dynamics of differential inclusion governing the localised border regime, and act in solidarity with the illegalised subjects crossing the border daily. This paper thus attempts to foreground how an engagement on the level of affect – through the experiential aspect of the immersive soundwalk – in lieu of a purely aesthetic artistic form, can disrupt bordering logics. It is our contention that the immersive walk produced a counter-hegemonic discourse around a border otherwise primarily associated with its value as a tourist destination. Nonetheless, the paper also wishes to contribute to the discussion of the limits of such artistic endeavours. In working with an audience who occupies a

position of privilege in this specific border region rather than those who cross it, the project was unable to relieve the tension produced by the in/visibility of undocumented migration. We were conscious that making migrants visible did not translate ipso facto into an incremental ability on their part to speak publicly. Nor did the project, given the institutional limitations imposed by the local administrations for its implementation, foregrounded a radical public critique of the border regime. Rather than pretending to solve these tensions, the project worked within the interstices of institutionalised in/visibility in order to provoke discussions, raise awareness and encourage action among its audience. This paper engages with the senses and affect to challenge hegemonic bordering logics, contributing to discussions on the transformative potential and limitations of Border Art and its ability to navigate the contradictions of representation, solidarity, and in/visibility.

BANDITE was born in 2023 from the vision of Valentina Bosio and Simona Sala, whose individual research paths intersect at the nexus of art and activism. Grounded in an anthropological approach to physical theatre, their work explores the interstices between theatre, dance, visual and plastic arts, video, and technology. BANDITE aims to transcend purely performative language, developing a fusion of diverse codes and forms of expression that reclaim theatre as a collective space and a privileged observatory for engaging with and comprehending contemporaneity. Their latest personal projects explored themes such as memory, witnessing, cross-border migratory movements, and frontiers, culminating in the shared trajectory that inspired BANDITE's creation.

Gabriele Ollino is a PhD Candidate in Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, with a project financed by the ESRC and the Cambridge Trust. His project, titled *The Ambiguous Border: (In)visibility, humanitarian action and the making of (re-)bordered Europe at its margins*, deals with the historical and contemporary dynamics of cross-border illegalised mobility in the Hautes Alpes region. His academic interests encompass migration, border struggles, and the potentials and limitations of vernacular humanitarian interventions. Gabriele previously completed an MPhil in Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge and an MSc in Conflict Studies at SOAS, University of London.

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