Unconditional hospitality: art and commons under planetary migration

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ABSTRACT

In both European and non-European cities, public spaces are formed by racist and segregative politics that influence everyday life. Planetary migration flows and recently implemented border politics tend to leave the most vulnerable in precarious conditions, not only in the case of migrants/refugees but also in the case of citizens. This article focuses on how artistic methodologies in the context of migration/refugeehood can experiment with “alternative modes of existence”. How can newly imagined modes of co-existence contribute to the creation of minor public spaces as well as the transformation of institutions? How can public art construct different and diverse guest-host relationships? How can artistic research and actions reveal precarious labour conditions, stage radical discursive debates, and transform existing institutional practices? This article is based on theoretical discussions of commoning and decolonization practices. It will focus on the art and activist practices, and analyse such, of Al-Madafeh/Living Room (Sandi Hilal, Stockholm) and The Silent University (Ahmet Ogut), and others.

KEYWORDS

Migration struggle; commons; unconditional hospitality; solidarity; contemporary art; refugee

Introduction

My aim in this article is to make key case analysis about two art practices: Al-Madafeh/Living Room (initiated by Sandi Hilal, Stockholm) and The Silent University (initiated by Ahmet Ogut). I argue that both practices not only contribute a challenging discourse on unconditional hospitality but also propose alternative forms of common spaces in the institutional context and in the wider field. I stage the article in three parts, firstly giving a wider picture of and perspective on the recent condition of planetary migration. I think it is vital to understand later cases in such framing in our current conditions of migrant issues. In doing so, I also introduce and inform readers about various collectives and practices from diverse migrant and refugee struggles. With these examples, I intend to draw a line of migrant and refugee solidarity and NGO/activist work that engenders solidarity within social and political contexts and practices. Furthermore, I unpack the shift of the concept of public space to the commons in order to frame the base of my cases as a practice of commoning. In conclusion, the artist and architect engagements in migrant solidarities, in particular the two case studies, Al-Madafeh/Living Room and The Silent University, offer examples of “new roles for art and curating” in the frame of the theme of this special issue. The primary features of such practices are the challenge and the performativity that they offer in order to discuss the commons, and which are based on negotiation and shifting grounds of hospitality.

Planetary migration

Migration and refugeehood are planetary levels in which labour conditions, levels of precariousness and the relation to landscapes are connected. Planetary, here, refers not only to the co-existence of various interconnected scales on the earth but also to a contemporary spatial approach to the world and the shared effects of climate change and ecological catastrophes. Uneven neoliberal urban transformation leading to spatial segregation among vulnerable communities, the colonial extraction of landscapes, the use of chemicals in agricultural lands that often lead to the depopulation of villages and civil wars … these are examples of structural violence that harm the most vulnerable migrant communities. Policies on migrants, border politics, and surveillance infrastructures are also becoming more severe under the states of exception of the Covid-19 epidemic. Not only nation-states but any hegemonic mechanism establishes severe territorialization that the most vulnerable people suffer from. Planetary co-existence is often explained through the debate of the Anthropocene (Will et al., 2011).1 According to this, humans are perceived as the primary agents shaping the planet, through their extraction of natural resources and their territorialization of other humans and non-humans alike, and climate change and extinction are some of the outcomes. As Dipesh Chakrabarty explains about the Anthropocene: “Even though it refers to a new period in the planet’s geological history and therefore to geological time, the
term ‘Anthropocene’ was used from its very inception as a measure not of geological time but of the extent of human impact on the planet.” (Chakrabarty 2018).

The human impact has a planetary scale of the extraction of landscapes that can be explained from slavery and European hegemonic colonial histories. For centuries, colonial and capitalist history has been operating through segregation and the discrimination of race, gender, and labour in indigenous lands. Nowadays, the formation of social inequalities at a planetary level increases food insecurity, the contamination of natural resources, and the lack of housing in the migrant landscapes. One of the best examples of a description of this narrative can be found in Amitav Ghosh’s novel Gun Island (2019).

In the novel, the reader follows Bangladeshi refugees who have to leave the Sundarbans region because of a lack of livestock in the delta between India and Bangladesh as the water is being contaminated by industry and the soil is being washed away by floods. As they have no jobs and no means to sustain their lives anymore they begin a refugee odyssey to Europe by attempting to cross the Mediterranean sea. The two migrants cross the borders of Turkey and Africa in the hands of human traffickers and face many obstacles. Throughout the trajectory of refugeehood, the novel covers many geographies and territories, from the Indian delta to the Iraqi-Turkey border, to Africa and to the Mediterranean, with the two Sundarbanis navigating through chat messages, phone locations, and online thresholds.

As a passage for undocumented migrants since the 1990s, the border of Turkey’s eastern region has, since 2013, been facing an intense flow of migrants as an outcome of the Syrian civil war. Many refugee camps have been established officially by the state, and run by the UN, in the southeast region of Turkey. Besides this, many self-organized temporary camps, supported by solidarity communities and local municipalities have also come into existence. Infrastructural establishment in the region has spatially transformed the migrant landscapes into an extractive means, as most of the camps have integrated water, electricity, food, and dwelling logistics. Consequently, this has affected the precarious agricultural labour, which has been taken over by the new wave of refugees (Tan 2016). The effects of war and the active renegotiation of borders demand a transformation in the way the spatial infrastructure is approached and worked with, not only as the functional and scalar threshold of architecture but as mechanisms that form part of what Elizabeth Povinelli calls geontologies of landscape (Povinelli 2016). According to Povinelli, both “geos” (non-life) and “being” (ontology) are “currently in play in the late liberal governance of difference and markets,” in response to which she outlines new figures, tactics, and discourses of power by proposing a definition of biopolitics without a separation between Life and Non-life. According to this argument, landscapes and infrastructures function as instrumentalizing colonial extraction. Controlling through administering the landscapes and infrastructures leads to surveillance operations. Dispossession, property, and extraction are related to racial bodies and landscapes. Defining vulnerabilities in the Anthropocene era, the planetary migrant landscapes serve as a trajectory of narratives that relates to dispossession and extraction, operating through necropolitics.2 Thus, describing this intertwined planetary context of undocumented migration and refugeehood, which has marked the last twenty years especially, is vital, as the many-layered impacts and effects relating to it force us to research and engage at multilayered levels. Especially the alternative mode of existence, through contemporary art-related practices (from artistic to curatorial), are attached to such multilayered impacts and the effects of planetary migration. Seeking alternatives to instrumentalizing forms of temporary aid, solidarity groups and projects aim to foster bases of shared vulnerability and precariousness. Using different media and means of representation, as well as research-based artistic practices and methodologies which connect the struggles through planetary migration, artists are involved at the voluntary level as well as reactivating migration struggles in widening discourses on public spaces, the empowerment of vulnerability, and forms of struggle.

Self-organized associations or platforms for migrant struggles are often not sustainable as they are constantly being challenged by having to handle multiple tasks simultaneously. As Firat Genç indicates, when he summarizes the unsustainable activities of the Istanbul-based Gökmen Dayanışma Ağısı (Migrant Solidarity Network)3 (Genç 2017), migrant solidarity is an arena of struggle. Migrant struggle deals with many obstacles, as well as possibilities, too, that lead to other minor solidarity initiations in different formats. Among the many different initiatives, Tarlabası Solidarity (Tarlabası Dayanışma) in Istanbul closely supports the African immigrants in Istanbul, and in the neighbourhood that does not equal the conditions of the Syrian refugees in Turkey (as the African immigrants are living in much worse conditions). Another important but rather different initiative is the Mesopotamia Ecology Association in Diyarbakır, which has created many seed exchanges and initiated plantings in temporary refugee camps in the region since 2016. The Kaplar Collective (Kaplar Koletifi) in İzmir hosted several workshops for children, as well as cooking workshops with refugee women, between 2016–2018, and another active association İmce Solidarity Initiative continues to provide aid, pedagogical, and art
activities for undocumented migrants in the area of Izmir town. Such temporary and permanent practices aim basically at sharing the vulnerable life of refugees in the precarious urban areas. Between 2013 and 2017, cultivating vegetable gardens also became an everyday practice in temporary camps in the south-east of Turkey. Initiatives such as PIPKA Solidarity on the Island of Lesbos strengthened collective survival. PIPKA is a self-organised camp serving as a safe passage for the incoming refugees arriving by boat. In contrast to the Moria camp, which resembles a detention camp, PIPKA is a place of sharing and care and the provision of safe hospitality, where the refugee herself/himself also becomes the host. A different and very courageous approach led to the establishment of the squat hotel City Plaza that hosted many refugee families between 2016–2019. This was not only a temporary hosting place but also an experience of how to run an autonomous infrastructure in the centre of the city of Athens under conditions of economic precarity and racist attacks. The occupation by the Greek activists of the Solidarity Initiative for Economic and Political Refugees and by refugee families was a necessity after the announcement of the agreement between the European Union and Turkey in March 2016 to limit the flow of irregular migrants entering the EU through Turkey. Under the terms of the deal, Turkey received financial aid and in exchange agreed that all “irregular migrants” (i.e. those who had not gone through the asylum process) crossing from Turkey into Greece would be sent back. Each arrival would be individually assessed by the Greek authorities. The deal was widely criticized, as it appeared to treat migrants as exchangeable subjects for the sake of political advantage (since there was also an offer of renewed consideration of Turkey’s bid to join the EU) (Wikipedia, 0000). This led to a huge crisis in Greece: “The tens of thousands of refugees who were about to cross the Greek-Macedonian borders found themselves trapped in Greece, homeless or ‘semi-housed,’ crowded into awful conditions, in camps, athletic fields, airports, and ports, and facing extreme poverty and a lack of basic amenities.” Many self-organized refugee solidarity groups based in Athens and the Greek Islands were offering immediate aid to arrivals as well as spaces to host those who crossed the border from Turkey. This situation also created conflict between the Greek government, Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency), and the refugee activists.

This circumstance removes the duality of host and guest and allows us to understand the specificity of City Plaza not simply as a place of refugee hosting or shelter but as somewhere where shared vulnerabilities in the face of the ongoing urban economic and refugee crises create the commons. In a sense, this process has engendered a new community that reforms itself over time through the struggle with the design and condition of the hotel building (Kotronaki et al., 2018). City Plaza reports that, funded only by small donations and the fundraising efforts of ordinary people, it has hosted around fifteen hundred people, enrolled eighty children in school and provided residents with three meals a day and all hygiene necessities as well as medical care. It has also managed to make this place a hub of solidarity, self-organization, and humanity.

At this juncture, I would like to shift the focus from engagements in care and solidarity movements to projects that seek to document refugee predicaments and solidarity. “The Residuals (Geride Kalanlar)” is a video documentary by Artikisler Collective (Artikışler Kolektifi) that documents the solidarity activities by following the refugees from Syria to Turkey, and to Greece, the Balkans, and Europe: “The Residuals recounts the narratives of refugees and migrants in both new state-run refugee camps and housing initiatives started by migrant solidarity movements throughout the south-eastern region in Turkey.” The visual narrative aims to document practices of daily commoning on how social relations are forged during the process of migration. MANY, a project by the architect Keller Easterling is another visual compilation that consists of field research on refugee solidarities from different parts of the world. MANY is: “... a research and design that assembled almost 100 representative entries for the platform. Each of the entries point to thousands of existing visa sponsors in education, agriculture, medicine, and other industries as well as a strategy for aggregating these networks and strengthening them with spatial variables.” MANY reveals several forms of migration, spanning from the undocumented asylum seekers, and touching on environmental migration, visa policies, and the labour conditions of different institutional scales. The London-based architecture research group, Forensic Architecture (FA), continues to create visual evidence of migrant necropolitics by making clear who the actors and agencies are in this struggle. Recently, FA revealed investigations of the pushback (informal forcible removals) on the Evros/Meric river between Greece and Turkey that coincides “... with escalation of violence at the border, diplomatic conflict, and the arrival of coronavirus in the region.” FA has also revealed maps of migrant deaths and attacks on boats in the Mediterranean Sea. FA uses architectural methodology in visualizing events and providing analytical evidence of structural violence. They investigate state and corporate violence, human rights violations, and environmental destruction. The FA team engages directly with survivors and explores visually their memories of trauma. FA represents an unusual side
of the migrant struggle, using the methodology of architecture and design in supporting the visibility of the violation of human rights in undocumented migration processes and creating it as evidence in the international legal arena.

In summary, realizing the necropolitical systems that define migrants and refugees as disposable entities without life, and acting against this within sustained minor solidarities as entangled collective survival will connect migrant trajectory landscapes in a planetary scale. I have indicated here many diverse practices of collectives and struggles that are using/have used multiple media and artistic practices, which leads us to the redefining of spatial discourses on public space, urban spaces, and the different forms of migrant struggles.

Spaces of commoning

How do displacement, migration, and contested spaces affect the notion of the commons? In recent years, the discourse of public space in the art world has been transformed, at least partially, into a discourse of commoning and the commons because of the migration, labour, ecological and other struggles that were happening in different parts of the world (Stavrides 2016) (Baldauf et al. 2016). (Tan 2004, 2018). Defining space collectively problematizes the term “public space,” as public space is a concept defined in a European context, based on the distinction between private and public space. However, this division of the dichotomy of spaces that defines the border of governing and property is blurred, and is questioned by many socially-engaged art and curatorial practices under the oppression of neoliberal state policies, European Union citizenship policies, and racist institutional governing practices. The discourse of the commons has introduced collective grassroots action based on the creation of everyday life, instead of the separation of private/public spaces as organized by governing bodies. Art and curatorial practices and methodologies contribute to producing critical discourses on activism and imaginative contra-strategies against governing and necropolitics. Spaces of commoning are also about creating the infrastructure of commons that artistic practices are engaged with.

In order to detail the concept of commons, I refer to Massimo De Angelis, who submits that “Commons is a means of establishing a new political discourse that builds on and helps to articulate the many existing, often minor, struggles, and recognizes their power to overcome capitalist society.” He defines the idea of the commons not merely in terms of the resources that we share but as a way of commoning, that is, a social process of “being common.” It is the way in which resources are pooled and made available to a group of individuals, who then build or rediscover a sense of community (Massimo De Angelis and Architektur, 2010). However, commoning practices require a social assembly process, including common decision-making and non-capitalist accumulation—thus, it is difficult to develop a consistent design program. The dilemma in architecture is rooted in the question of whether an existing act such as squatting in an abandoned building is also a practice of architecture. For some architects, even a self-organized refugee camp that has gone through several “intifadas” can be a space of commoning that can inform us about design and architecture. The Palestine-based collective Decolonizing Architecture (DAAR) uses the term al masha (communal land) instead of commons: “Masha is shared land, which was recognized through practice in the Islamic world …. Masha could only exist if people decided to cultivate the land together. The moment they stop cultivating it, they lose its possession. It is possession through a common use.” DAAR uses al masha as a practice of commoning as direct participation and common taking care of life.

Practices and discourses on commons vary according to scale and territorial specificity. Space-based solidarity practice is one part of practising the commons; others span from the urban to the rural, at different scales. Here, the question of scale is not only a physical element of the infrastructure but also reflects how it is conceived politically. Stavros Stavrides echoes this argument, as does DAAR, in defining how common space and its structure are important. For Stavrides, “common space shapes commoning practices as well as the subjects of commoning” (Stavrides 2016, 433–34). Common space is relational and relative; the relati-onality and relativity of a common space plays a role in the politically conceived scales of how we practise and negotiate with commoning. Central to the meaning of “commons” in this art context is not what we own or share or produce in terms of property, but, rather, the social relations most closely connected to everyday life.

The food activist Raj Patel has looked at the part that food has played in social movements and in helping to create different forms of solidarity—for example, the Black Panthers’ free breakfast program for school children, the People’s Grocery in Oakland, or the international peasants’ movement Via Campesina. For him, sustaining the cultivation and sharing of food is also about how food-related movements should act in solidarity with other movements. (Patel, 2008, 1–8). Accordingly, for many thinkers “commons” or “practice of commoning”, it is about how we manage resources together and relate struggles of rights. Shared practice of struggles of rights of food, labor, gender, urban or rural develops the practice of commons in commons spaces. The concept of
“commons,” holds a sensitive position within any given community or public, especially in contested territories or cities subject to the threat of the neoliberal destruction of the built environment. Negotiation and the resolution of conflicting values are key to such commoning practices. As Stavrides argues, more than the act or fact of sharing, it is the existence of common grounds for negotiation that is most important (Stavrides 2016). Conceptualizing commons with reference to the public does not focus so much on similarities or commonalities but on exploring the very differences between people on a purposefully instituted common ground, thus establishing grounds for negotiation rather than affirming that which is shared. In conclusion, commoning practices require creating models of criticality that are connected to new forms of communality through places and infrastructures. Commoning practices enforce “collective” effort (collective action) and forms of cohabitation and collective precariousness.

Unconditional hospitality

Migrant trajectories are about setting the alternative mode of existence by shifting the guest-host relations. The host and transition countries require situational border policies and surveillance parameters—for instance, passing from Turkey, where an official refugee status does not exist, serves as a passage to Europe. It became more clear due to the Syrian civil war that borders have been both thick and fluid since 2011. As migrants/refugees are often considered as guests that do not belong to the place of arrival, this creates a power relation by the host. Many artistic and solidarity practices transform the discourse of hospitality into spaces of commons, where the dichotomy of host and guest relation turns into unconditional hospitality for socio-political experiences of alternative existences (Tan 2010, 2012). I will conclude this study by examining in greater detail two extraordinary long-term projects that are the outcome of solidarity work initiated by artists and architects: Al-Madafeh and The Silent University.

Al-Madafeh (Sandi Hilal, Stockholm)

“As Yasmeen gave me strength through her hospitality, I am now giving strength to Ayat. This network allows us to look at ourselves in the mirror and understand our own lives through the experiences and stories of others, however different they may be. None of us were capable of creating a sense of belonging to the public by ourselves, but we all shared the desire to contribute to the life of the place we live in. The creation of a network of living rooms is at the core of a political movement that puts hospitality at its center” explains the Palestinian artist/architect Sandi Hilal, and a member of DAAR (Decolonizing Architecture Art and Research), from the West Bank and Stockholm. Hilal aims to create performative intimate spaces in diverse places such as homes and art institutions in order to experience unconditional hospitality and its radical experience of the physical space. She initiated her project “Al-Madafeh” in Abu Dhabi (2018), Stockholm (2018), Boden (2017), Mosaic Rooms (2021 – 22) and the Fawwar Refugee Camp (2018), with living rooms that are about activating hospitality. “Al-Madafeh” means living room. A living room is a place in the home that is in-between private and public spaces. Hilal uses the practice of hospitality not simply in terms of refugees and asylum seekers as subjects of unconditional hospitality, but to subvert the role of guest and host. The socio-political meaning, and the migration policies also, redefine the act of hosting: in “Al-Madafeh”, the guests are activated as hosts.

For Jacques Derrida, hospitality is the manner in which we relate to ourselves and to others. Derrida asserts the principle of “unconditional hospitality,” in which the condition of meeting, facing, and opening yourself to a stranger has no precondition defining the unexpected encounter, which is unconditionally open (Derrida 2000). Generally, an invitation is a prerequisite in hospitality. However, in “unconditional hospitality,” the crucial element is to take the risk of accepting the “stranger,” whoever he or she is, and whether or not he or she is invited. As a result, “unconditional hospitality” is a radical experiment; it is also impossible to achieve. Derrida’s construction of hospitality is explicitly tied to the idea of “home,” and requires the host to be the “master” of the house, country, or nation, and thereby have the power to be hospitable. The host-guest relationship is thus built on the principles of ownership, property, and, by extension, self-identity. So, I would argue that the dualist structure of the host/guest in Derrida’s notion of hospitality is still based on possession and ownership (Tan 2010, 2012). This fundamental structure reveals itself differently when it is experienced in performative grounds where there are several conditions of hosting, as in “Al-Madafeh”/ Living Room. When Living Room was installed in the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven for an exhibition titled “Position 4,” Sandi Hilal explains that she was waiting for someone from the museum administration when she met an Afghani man, Shafiq, who works in the museum as a security guard: “He introduced himself to me, and as soon as I began telling him about the Living Room, he instantly understood the project. I told him that the only condition for this project to exist was for a host to come forward, and he replied, with no hesitation: ‘I’m the host.” Shafiq became the host, but he also invited members from the local community of rejected asylum seekers to be hosts. They
came only two at a time, as they had already built up a strong sense of solidarity and did not want to end up just socializing amongst themselves. We placed the Living Room at the entrance of the museum, which offered them the opportunity to meet people with whom they would not ordinarily have come into contact as equals.  

Here, we see how the structures of host and guest are shifting ground, both conceptually and physically. Moreover, it also reveals the social strata of refugeehood in a city where institutional workers from migrant backgrounds and asylum seekers, as unrecognized urban citizens in Eindhoven, practise hosting as well as being a guest in forming together a common space hosted by an institution.

Hilal has developed a network between the madafehs/living rooms that she has initiated in different cities. She also designs the physical spaces of each madafeh/living room, in which hosts and guests create a common space in order to discuss what these concepts are in different conditions of hospitality. Previously, as DAAR, Hilal realized a process of assembling and negotiating with the female inhabitants a seventy-square-metre public space in the centre of a neighbourhood in the Fawwar Palestinian Refugee Camp in the West Bank. The five-year-long process of designing the common space with the participation of the women in the camp was one of Hilal’s experiences of being the architect and an agency in the proceeding discussions and negotiations about empowering women’s identity in the camps. The square is used by the women living around its neighbourhood who do not have many options of public space in the camp. The semi-public space was primarily for the use of women, children, and young people, who activated the square for cooking, sharing events, and other activities that were initiated according to the women’s needs. In the other Al-Madafehs, Hilal is outside of her native country of Palestine and questioning the formation of her citizenship and the potentialities of spaces of commons, starting from Sweden and other cities and linking to the Fawwar camp. Living Rooms are spaces of radical experiences, to face the discourse of the host and guest relation. Each person that creates and hosts a madafeh uses and activates the space differently by using their own agency in hosting: “It is important to think of the project as a network of madafeh that generates a movement of people who see the possibility to fully exercise their own agency in the act of hospitality.”

Who is the guest and who is the host in these conditions is always ambivalent. Here, perhaps more than in most situations, the host-guest relationship is always an antagonistic, fragmented and uncanny one. Derrida’s “unconditional hospitality” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, 19) is itself based on a reading of Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy of the face-to-face encounter, from which comes the subject’s responsibility to the Other, whose very presence makes demands of the subject before he or she can respond to or ignore the demand. For Levinas, this encounter means that the Other is prior to or superior to the self and is the basis of ethics. Yet it is also based upon an “impossibility,” or, as Simon Critchley has described it, a “radical and unfulfillable demand,” which is akin to the impossible nature of unconditional hospitality (Critchley 2008, 10). In her article on the work of Krzysztof Wodiczko, Rosalyn Deutsche takes this further by referring to Levinas’s assertion that “my relationship with the Other as neighbor gives meaning to my relations with all the others” (Deutsche, 2002, 39–40). Thus the subject’s responsibility is limited not to the Other but is extended to Others, making the encounter even more uncanny. In this respect, hospitality involves a demanding responsibility. In addition to this discourse, it can be argued that Hilal introduces a more radicalized meaning as the “right to host,” where the guest may realize their own agency in hosting. Hilal adds: “Many people exercise the right to host without realizing the power it carries. Thus, the creation of a network is not relief, but rather recognition of the universal right to host … It activates the rights of temporary people to host and not to eternally be a guest; the right to claim life in their new destination without feeling obliged to revoke the desire of belonging to life back home”. The right to host is important for Hilal in order to start the discursive encounter of the host itself in Al-Madafehs/Living Room, which transforms the whole project beyond a social sphere.

Hilal began the project in November 2016 when the Public Art Agency Sweden invited her to Boden, a town where refugees live. The Swedish government wanted to create public art in marginalized regions such as Boden. Boden is home to a military base and the site of the Boden Fortress built in the beginning of the 20th century. The purpose of the fortress was to defend Sweden from a possible attack from the east, from Russia, and the town still houses the largest garrison of the Swedish military. The Public Art Agency Sweden has decreased in recent years. However, it has simultaneously become—like many other urban areas in Sweden—a place where refugees are accommodated. In this context, Hilal’s intervention in the town is about the unconditional notion of the guest and host relation that questions the private and public space, as well as the agency of art. As the commissioning agent, Public Art Agency Sweden, has stated: “The town of Boden has undergone radical change in the last decades. From being a protected military area, which foreign visitors were forced to obtain special permission to enter, Boden has become a central place of arrival for refugees to Sweden. Based on the history of Boden, Sandi Hilal has
investigated refugeedom and the roles of host and visitor. She stresses how refugees risk being trapped in the role of guests in a state of permanent temporariness, and asks on whose terms integration is supposed to work.”

Through the commissioning of this public art project that began in Boden, Hilal met Yasmeen and Ibrahim, a young refugee couple, and developed the idea of initiating living rooms while she was sitting in their own living room with the Swedish Public Art Agency representatives: “Yet here, Yasmeen and Ibrahim, in their small living room, can change the familiar roles: instead of being refugees hosted by the government, they can play the role of host, hosting the Swedish government. Their living room gave them the opportunity to refuse their role of obedient guest, complying with the norms and rules, and exercising their right to be a host.” (Hilal 2018, 371). Hilal wanted to meet the refugees who were living in Boden and to hear about the kind of life they were living there, as it seemed there was no future on the horizon for them in the town. When Yasmeen and Ibrahim invited her to their home, Hilal describes the strange coincidental moment during the visit where the Swedish officials are hosted too. Hilal’s questions were: “How can refugees exercise their right to host and what is the symbolic and practical role of the living room? Having a living room enables one to be a host, to invite others and set the agenda oneself. Perhaps a living room holds the potential to bring about change in society.” The artist decided to adapt one of the apartments into a semi-public living room for the refugees: Al madafeh. This initiated living room was to be used by the refugees for hosting events, dinners, and meetings. Thus: “… the asylum-seekers can invite people on their own terms and enable a space for the exchange of knowledge and ideas as well as social mobilization.”

Hilal has since been invited by other institutions to create several madafehs in private houses, institutions, and exhibition spaces. The project has transformed diverse host and guest relations. Also, it has transformed its discourse in the experience of the relation of the shifting and transferring of the agency of the hosts. The multiplicity of spaces such as living rooms in houses or in the exhibition spaces of art museums or institutions of “Al-Madafehs” offer various debates on citizenship, public spaces, urban spaces, and means of performativity. For example, as a colonized land, hosting a living room in the West Bank/ Occupied Palestine offers a more diverse discussion on guest/host relations than in Sweden, and with many Palestinians having official refugee status in their own land, this and the fact that it is a controlled public space represents a different reality to Sweden, which has other means of control in public spaces. This discussion points out the agencies’ conditions and the creation of publicness and collectivity in the living rooms. As it is performed in art spaces, in an exhibition in a museum, for example, the experience of “Al-Madafehs” is a performative space of co-existence of common space where the audience is not the exhibition visitor anymore but the transformer of the agency itself.

In summary, “Al-Madafehs” creates a network of living rooms in order to discuss possibilities of unconditional hospitalities and the radical spatial experiences of hosting and being guests by empowering the role of the agency that initiates and performs it. Such a network of infrastructure reveals debates on citizenship, common spaces, and practices of commons, and the role of institutions in Europe.

**The Silent University**

The Silent University is another example of discursive host and guest relations that differs in the various countries and cities where it has been initiated. The project considers pedagogies as the commons, as a right to perform by the refugees/asylum seekers in any conditions in the arrival (host) countries. The Silent University is a platform of alternative knowledge production and exchange. It is an artist-run practice, an autonomous knowledge-exchange platform, and for refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants. The Silent University aims to challenge the idea of silence as a passive state and explore the powerful potential of silence through performance, writing, and group reflection. These explorations attempt to make apparent the systemic failure and the loss of skills and knowledge experienced through the process of the silencing of those who are seeking asylum. The platform was created and initiated in 2012 by the artist Ahmet Ögüt, in cooperation with many researchers, and it has two principles and intertwined structures. These deal, firstly, with the notion of subjectivity among refugee and asylum seekers as it is defined under a state of exception; secondly, it practices a new form of alternative pedagogy in which knowledge production foregrounds the coexistence of both the refugees themselves and of the public (Malzacher et al., 2016). The whole structure as a mobile academy is a transversal machine where “citizenship” is experienced beyond clear borders. As a form of translocal, borderless knowledge production, The Silent University addresses issues of citizenship, education, institutionalism, borders, war, refugee identity, documents/documenting, urban segregation, and participation in a commons. The artwork produces an “uncommon knowledge” about the shared experiences of humans and how they are represented by structures of state power. The project depends upon research methods that involve artistic exploration of the subject of refugee status and the simultaneous deconstruction of methodologies common to the social sciences and political discourse. The main status of refugees, asylum seekers, and
undocumented migrants differs in relation to citizenship in the arrival countries. Those who are engaged in The Silent University set lectures and seminars about their professions, which they are unable to continue to practise in the arrival country. They combine this with the narrative of their trauma, in both the country they have left as well as in the recent arrival country they are trying to adapt to and engage with. In these terms, The Silent University not only creates a pedagogical module that inspires alternative teaching and learning processes but it is also, for the migrants, a platform of hospitality and for expressing themselves and finding their identity through collective engagements. For example, The Silent University branch that is hosted by an art institution such as Tensta Konsthall (in Sweden, coordinated by Fahima Alnablusi) performs different functions, ranging from teaching the Swedish and Arabic languages with volunteer teachers, as well as a platform of hospitality in the immigrant neighbourhood that engages the migrants in using the art institution (Fahlen, 2013).27 Talks, events, and workshops are also organized by the migrants, in collaboration with artists, that focus on urgent issues to do with migration and society. In this example, The Silent University functions as a para-institution that brings all levels of migrants together, and especially women and children, in an art space, and for the same reason reactivates that space. As an online project, The Silent University uses various digital platforms and social media in order to disseminate printed works and initiate discussions between researchers and academics, with a view to creating a performative archive and developing transversal research methodologies. I refer to a transversal method that ensures a trans-local, borderless knowledge production, which in a rhizomatic form reaches beyond topics of architecture and design to include citizenship, militant pedagogy, institutionalism, borders, war, being a refugee, documents/documenting, urban segregation, commons, and others. Transversal practice here mainly refers to Félix Guattari’s notion and practice, which he describes as “[N]either institutional therapy, nor institutional pedagogy, nor the struggle for social emancipation, but, which invoked an analytic method that could transverse these multiple fields (from which came the theme ‘transversality’)” (Guattari 1996, 121). I understand the notion of transversality as a practice in which epistemic and theoretical categories are transverse, and replace each other. It is a practice that is very much embedded, bodily, in everyday life (Tan, 2017). The “institution/instituting” is part of this, and so creating such a transversal practice also influences the political body of an institution and the way we are instituting.”

The Silent University’s structure as a mobile academy is a transversal machine that evolves through the participation of people, of the audience or the collaborators, whether temporary or long term. Thus, it extends beyond socially engaged or public art as we have become used to defining it over the last ten years. For instance, The Silent University in London was hosted by Tate Modern and the Delfina Foundation, and Immigration Movement International, initiated by the artist Tania Bruguera, was hosted temporarily by the Queens Museum, New York. In both cases, these projects were presented in art institutions rather than in other forms of social institutions. The “audience” remains broader and more multiple, compared with institutions such as NGOs or universities. Being hosted by art institutions has many advantages for the artist, who needs space, funding, and a media presence even for a temporary, process-based initiative. The timeline for these process-based practices is generally fluid as there are so many people involved in collective production. Each contributor or participant may take one aspect of the initiative further each time the practice is reformed. Therefore, the horizons of such practices are often vague, or there is no concrete outcome as artistic presentation. Furthermore, the term “collaboration” can become an ambiguous, if there is any conflict in the relationship with a hosting institution. Whenever a Silent University platform (such as a conference, meeting, research room, or open course session) needs to be set up within a host institution, the whole negotiation process not only questions the role of The Silent University but of the host institution itself, in terms of the guest/host relationship, the identity of the institution, the ethics of diverse audience participation, legal contracts, and institutional policy. In this process, the host institution needs to re-examine its institutional nature and decide whether it wants to be a part of the social transformation in processing the instituting practice, or to continue to remain a neoliberal, bureaucratic instrument of culture. The Silent University does not have central funding. Each of its activities or platforms needs to be budgeted for. However, the ideology of that budget is also subject to questions. For example, in recent discussions, different Greek activists wanted to know the source of any funds for the establishment of The Silent University Athens. Most such meetings are based on voluntary labour. However, the exploitation of voluntary labour in NGOs and other humanitarian non-profit organizations has been severely criticized in recent field studies on labour, and the refugees and undocumented people who lead or participate in the Silent University platforms are in precarious positions (as are the activists and artists, etc.). Silent University branches hosted by institutions are offered funding as well as space; coordinators and lecturers need to be paid. Rejecting “voluntary labour”, The Silent University is keen to establish a fee structure for the participants. Another issue of concern is exactly who the audience is in The Silent University, as this transversal institute is mostly hosted by art and academic institutions, which may be more open to debate the formation of public space within the performativity of socially engaged art. The definition of audience and artistic practice duality does not appear in The Silent
University as the participants of this practice immediately become the agencies themselves. For example, in Athens I met an asylum seeker who had just arrived with his family on the human trafficking boats from the Aegean seashore and who wanted to take part in The Silent University workshop that I was leading in a refugee solidarity space in the Exarchia district of the city. When I interviewed him about his experience and why he needed to participate in this workshop when he and his family were in such a vulnerable condition, he replied that just as there was an urgency to their need to find shelter and food, taking part in The Silent University to present his agency in his journey of migration in crossing borders was urgent and necessary too.

As a living body of a transversal institution, The Silent University forms itself and redefines itself throughout the host country, the host city, and the host institution. These relative experiences also reveal the protocols and policies of social engagements in the public space, which would differ in Germany or Turkey or Jordan, for example. The Silent University has functioned temporarily and permanently in those countries where the relation of refugees and host countries differ, and where the formation of public spaces and its institutions do as well. As forms of art, The Silent University uses public gatherings as workshops, symposia, and lectures. For example, in the upcoming Istanbul Biennale (2022), to which The Silent University is officially invited, many online and recorded interviews from across the various platforms and branches of The Silent University will be screened, and there will also be a symposium. However, it should be kept in mind that many similar projects or practices that I have experienced face the difficulty of visibility in these exhibition formats. How to present a process-based, collective artistic or architectural practice is always based on the question of how to convey the basic aim in creating a common space in the artistic realm.

In summary, The Silent University is an experience of precarious subjectivities. It is different from other forms of institutions such as universities, schools, art institutions, governments, or NGOs. It is rooted in a reconsideration and realization of the practices of collaboration, alternative economies, autonomous networks, self-organization, and surplus strategies, all of which differ radically from the reality of the neoliberal policies and logics of production that institutions are currently having forced upon them.

Conclusion

Much recent art, curatorial, and architectural practices that are framed within the scales of planetary migration are pursuing practices of commoning.
They create alternative modes of existence in many locations, either in art institutions or outside them. Spaces of commons, or minor public spaces of radical experiences of unconditional hospitalities created by artistic and architectural practices, are exemplified in this article.

How can newly imagined modes of co-existence contribute to the creation of minor public spaces as well as the transformation of institutions? How can public art construct different and diverse guest-host relationships? How can artistic research and actions reveal precarious labour conditions, stage radical discursive debates, and transform existing institutional practices? How could spaces of commoning proceed with artistic methodologies in the realm of global migration? These questions correspond to many projects that are mentioned in this article, and I will argue that there are some clear points it is important to proclaim.

Firstly, shared vulnerabilities and precarity are powerful in creating strong refugee solidarities. Many international artistic and curatorial projects worldwide are dealing with issues concerning the urgencies of migration and racism, and are collaborating with refugees and migrants in re-
activating common spaces with commoning practices. Those common spaces are sometimes digital platforms or physical spaces hosted by art institutions. Tensta Konsthall in Stockholm, for example, hosts a branch of The Silent University that runs many activities and language courses in the space of the institution that are led by the migrants themselves.

Secondly, I will argue that it is important to challenge the Guest and Host discourse within the artistic practices and platforms in order to critically approach the institutionally demanded public art project. Sandi Hilal’s project introduces its own agency of hosting of the guest, and both projects discussed here shift the Guest and Host relation. In the “Al-Madafeh” and in “The Silent University” practices, “the audience” are the active participants that shift the artistic experience within the hosting institution (whether a museum or an art institution) and demonstrate how the debate on public space can be recreated.

In summary, collectively organized artistic and architectural practices that deal with issues pertaining to migration and refugeehood, and which are realized in urban as well as art institutional contexts, continuously aim to create practices of commons. Socially engaged art and architecture in urban spaces and collective performances are methodologies of spaces of commons, which in both ways create transversal practices of institutionalism, creating collective agencies as well as alternative modes of art and curatorial modalities.

This article aims to contribute by intertwining practices that shift the ground of unconditional hospitality in spatial and conceptual levels. Moreover, it introduces the discourse of commons and aims to point out the shift of the discussion of public space in art and curatorial practices. At the beginning of the article, I framed my argument by providing a broad view of solidarity actions and migrant struggles on a planetary scale in order to highlight recent challenges in the studies and practice of both migration solidarity and contemporary art. Furthermore, I focus on two examples of transversal practices that shift and provide spaces to negotiate the notions of refugeehood, border, pedagogy, citizenship, places, hospitality, and institutionalism.

Notes

1. Steffen Will, Grinevald Jacques, Crutzen Paul, McNeill John, 2011, The Anthropocene: conceptual and historical perspectives, Phil. Trans. R. Soc. A369842–867
2. Achille Mbembe has described necropolitics as a "life to the power of death." Necropolitics is about the reconfiguration between resistance, sacrifice, and terror, and, as he claims, all conditions are more blurred under necropolitics. For Mbembe: “... to exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power,” “I have put forward the notion of necropolitics and necro-power to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead.” Mbembe, Achille (2003) “Necropolitics”, Trans. L. Meintjes, Public Culture, 15 (1): 11–40, Duke University Press.
3. See https://gocmendayanism.com/
4. See Wikipedia, s.v. “European Union–Turkey relations,” last modified 24 March 2019 14:25, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Union%E2%80%93Turkey_relations.
5. Loukia Kotronaki, Olga Lafazani, and Giorgos Maniatis, “Living Resistance: Experiences from Refugee Housing Squats in Athens,” South Atlantic Quarterly 117 (1 October 2018): 892.
6. See Refugee Accommodation Space City Plaza, “Open Letter to Ms. Aliki Papachela,” 25 April 2017 http://solidarity2refugees.gr/open-letter/.
7. http://artikler.net/works-isler/artakalan-the-residual/
8. Keller Easterling, MANY, 2019, https://vimeo.com/293274196, http://kellereasterling.com/exhibitions/many
9. See https://forensic-architecture.org/category/migration
10. See the [un] common place: art, public space and urban aesthetics in Europe, Editor: Bartolomeo Pietromarchi, ACTAR, Barcelona, 2005
11. Common Space: The City as Commons, Stavros Stavrides, Zed Books, 2016
12. Spaces of Commoning, Artistic Research and the Utopia of the Everyday, Edited by Anette Baldauf, Stefan Gruber, Moira Hille, Annette Krauss, Vladimir Miller, Mara Verlici, Hong-Kai Wang and Julia Wiener, Sternberg Press, 2016.
13. “Re-defining topography: suggestion on space/place in contemporary art”, Pelin Tan, in Kultürelle topographies, Editors: Reinhold Goerling, Victorio de Borso, Düsseldorf: Stuttgart Verlag, 2004. Tan, P. (2018). Practices of Commoning in Recent Contemporary Art. ASAP/Quarterly 7(3), 278–285.
14. Massimo De Angelis, in An Architektur, "On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides," e-flux, no. 17 (June 2010), New York. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/17/67351/on-the-commons-a-public-interview-with-massimo-de-angelis-and-stavros-stavrides/.
15. Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal, “A Common Space in Fawwar Refugee Camp,” 3 April 2013 https://theatrumundi.org/library/lorem-ipsum/?pdf=165. See also Alessandro Petti, “Architecture as Exile,” in Adhocracy Athens: From Making Things to Making the Commons, ed. Ethel Baraona Pohl, Pelin Tan, and César Reyes Nájera (Barcelona: dpr-barcelona; Athens: Onassis Cultural Center, 2015), 103–4.
16. See Kathryn Yusoff, “Politics of the Anthropocene: Formation of the Commons as a Geologic Process,” Antipode 50, no. 1 (2017): 272.
17. http://www.decolonizing.ps/site/
Chakrabarty, [60x109], [60x109], [60x109], [60x109], [60x109], [60x109], [60x109], [60x109], [60x109], [60x109], [60x109], [60x109], [60x109], [60x109], [60x109], [60x109], [60x109], [60x109], [60x109].

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