THE ART OF REIMAGINING SOUTH TYROL

How Artist's Engagement with Migration Creates new Understandings of Belonging, Home, and Community

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how (South) Tyrolean artists, who depict the topic of migration in their art, reimagine, and thereby create a solidary South Tyrolean community that encompasses the inclusion of new citizens. South Tyrol, a region in Northern Italy with a German and a Ladin speaking minority, is oftentimes cited as a model case for interethnic living (Peterlini 2023). At the same time, historical oppression of South Tyrol's cultures led to the presence of nationalistic and place-bound forms of identification that can lead to the rejection of migrants (Peterlini 2011). To become more inclusive towards migrants, it is important for South Tyrolean collective identity to move away from understanding cultural groups as fixed and distinct. In my research, I identify artists and art as key players in this social change. I use a postmigrant phenomenological approach introduced by Anne Ring Petersen (2019) to understand how artists create encounters between peoples, foster affect, and reimagine notions of home, community, and belonging, and thereby engender new ways of living together as South Tyroleans. I conducted interviews with five artists living in (South) Tyrol, who are actively engaged in assisting migrants and advocate for a more solidary approach to migration[1]. The IPA analysis of the interviews shows that art is central to social change and community making. With art, we can imagine and create new worlds, deconstruct stereotypes, denounce wrongdoings, foster affect, and mediate encounters that move beyond othering. The society that artists envision moves away from nationalistic fixed forms of identification towards more open, ambiguous, and fluid understandings of belonging.

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[1] The artists all have a sense of mobility in their own history or in their family's history; however, mobility/migration was not a criterium to participate in my research. I therefore cannot or do not want to define them neither as local nor as migrant artists.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores South Tyrolean identity, home, and community as imagined through the eyes of artists, who live in (South) Tyrol, and engage in solidarity activism for immigration and inclusion of migrants. Using a phenomenological and postmigrant approach, I explore the world that artists build by envisioning an inclusive intercultural South Tyrol, that moves away from xenophobia and blood/soil identification. This research examines how art is employed to enact cultural encounters, mediate communication, foster affect, and how the artists concerned reimagine notions of community, including how they integrate ideas about belonging and home.

My research is situated in South Tyrol, an autonomous province in Northern Italy with a German and a Ladin speaking minority. South Tyrol is an interesting case for cultural studies. Due to its history as a region shaped by the coexistence of multiple cultures and peoples, as well as its history of oppression and (forced) emigration, South Tyrolean identity is strongly connected to its land, its languages, and to the idea that it must defend its cultures from outside threat (Peterlini 2011). The consociational autonomy system is set in place to keep the linguistic/cultural groups apart and to protect them from assimilation, while supporting peaceful interactions. This co-living reality restricts the emergence of a collective postmigrant *we* identification. In fact, the consociational system clearly delineates and separates the sociolinguistic groups (Italian speaking, Ladin speaking, and German speaking) (Wisthaler 2016, 1272). The local politics tend to recognize or even embrace the advantages of this interculturality but frame additional languages and cultures as a threat (Carlà 2019). New citizens, who do not adhere to one of the language groups, do not fit into this interculturality. To foster their inclusion, South Tyrol needs to embrace more ambiguous collective identifications. Engaging with migration embodies both the opportunity and the challenge to find less nationalistic understandings of South Tyrol.

Understanding that cultural identities are constantly evolving and never clearly

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definable is an important transition not only for South Tyrol, but also for other communities in Europe. In fact, postmigrant interculturality has become a social reality, yet it is not being acknowledged as such (Moslund 2019). Including new citizens into European societies means embracing a postmigrant understanding of collective identities. This means moving beyond national identifications that understand cultures as fixed and clearly delineated, and towards a society that comprehends sociocultural diversity as natural (Moslund 2019, 352). Reimagining cultural identity is a core element in this process of social change (Meskimmon 2017). Engaging with the inclusion of migrants means revisiting the constructed collective identities of the South Tyrolean community, understanding that the Self is constructed in relation to the other (Ahmed 2000, 6), moving away from a rigid, traditional, and fixed understanding of cultural identification, and being able to embrace an ambiguous and fluid collective identity.

Artist activists are key figures in engendering this evolution of identity. Artists, in this context, engage with transitional topics in society and depict them with their art to engender solidary humanity. They use art as a tool for active worldmaking. Art has the power to imagine new worlds and to subsequently create them. Through community participation art helps performing citizenship and community in an explorative way. It is particularly useful in mediating the encounter and communication of cultures. In short, art is the key to reimagining South Tyrol as a postmigrant society.

My research approach is postmigrant, as it is explored and defined by Moslund (2019). I draw upon a number of important key works in this thesis, including Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) and Hall and Du Gay's take on identification and belonging to conceptualize identities (2024). In addition, I build on Sara Ahmed's phenomenological understanding of intercultural encounters and fetishizing the other presented in Strange Encounters (2000). I use Meskimmon's theories to combine these concepts with the power of art (Meskimmon 2011; 2017). I apply these theories to the five artist's interviews, that I analysed with IPA analysis, to construct my arguments.

This research is transdisciplinary applying a phenomenological and postmigrant approach to cultural studies, nationalism studies, migrant studies, and art analysis. Both the postmigrant approach, as well as the combination of art and migration, are relatively new developments. In addition, this area of research oftentimes focuses on exclusionary aspects of identity like othering, stereotyping, marginalizing etc. I, however, focus on solidary processes and encounters in South Tyrolean society. Such research has not been conducted in South Tyrol until now. Most research on migration to South Tyrol analyses migration in correlation with its autonomy system of segmented communities (e.g. Wisthaler 2016; Dosch and Lakatos 2020; Carlà 2019). One study that focuses on identities and belonging was conducted by Hans Karl Peterlini. He explores how young members of the Riflemen Association engage with notions of home, belonging, and community. He concludes his paper stating that South Tyrol's struggle with immigration shows that identification is strongly correlated to historical myths and an understanding of culture as fixed (Peterlini 2011, 176). My thesis builds on this statement and explores how artists instigate a movement towards a postmigrant understanding of society.

In short, even if the society in South Tyrol (as well as in Europe) is postmigrant (i.e. constructed by the meeting and mixing of several cultures and communities), the awareness of this fact is still missing. With this thesis, I argue that artist-activists, who engage in the topic of migration, are key figures in envisioning and engendering more open and fluid forms of collective identification. Studying their experience will help us understand how this change takes place in the South Tyrolean community.

The thesis is divided into two main analytical chapters, where the first examines the premise of the interviews, including the historical background and context to the region, and will give insight into the history of xenophobic discourse in South Tyrol. The second examines artists through narratives that I recorded in interviews with these individuals. I analyse the interviews in terms of role of art, creation of encounters, and reimagination of community, belonging, and home.

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1   SITUATING/BACKGROUND

This first chapter outlines the theoretical, historical, and social context that functions as a set up for the interviews that I will present in the second chapter. I pose the following question to the research: how did we get here and where are we; before I dive into the question of where can we go from here? Building on this I will argue that South Tyrolean collective identity builds on historical myths that fuel rejection of the other, as well as on the intercultural richness of three cultural/linguistic groups, that are assumed to be clearly delineated and fixed. This social reality makes it harder for migrants to fit into one of these three groups, but at the same time creates an opportunity for the emergence of a postmigrant understanding of community that allows for the inclusion of new cultures and languages (i.e. migrants). My point here is that the process of identification in South Tyrol is an inherently ambiguous process. This creates an opportunity to move away from a fixed understanding of cultures.

1.1   Analytical Framework: Postmigrant Encounters

As conceptual foundation of my thesis I use a framework proposed by Anne Ring Petersen (2019) in the *Handbook of Art and Global Migration*. The foundation for this thesis is postmigrant theory, which is a move away from us locals versus them migrants thinking (Moslund 2019, 352). It means understanding communities beyond nationalistic identification in the spirit of Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983). According to postmigrant theory, collective identity is constantly in the making and hard to define (Moslund 2019, 352). This conceptualization of identity goes along with Hall and Du Gay's theories on identity (Hall and Du Gay 2024). Identity is understood as identification and becoming. It is a process connected to both past and future that involves elements of consolidation and change. Identification involves agent self-identification, the situating/recognizing by others in the society, as well as social processes that mediate the encounter between self and others (Hall 1990). As I will explain soon, art can be employed as one of these social mediators (Meskimmon 2011).

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Even if mobility and diversity are a both historical and natural reality in South Tyrol, migration is still framed as exceptional. Politics, media, and public discourse define South Tyrolean society with nationalistic terms (Carlà 2019). Although there is acceptance of a certain intercultural reality, the us locals versus them outsiders notion is an important identitarian element. The origins of this thought pattern are explained by the research of Peterlini, another building block of my thesis (2011).

I combine his research with Sara Ahmed's theories in *Strange Encounters* (2000). Ahmed explains how a community delineates itself through facing the Stranger and recognizing him as the outsider. Moreover, identities are relationally built. Locals become locals in the moment, in which they recognize others as non-locals. There is no inherent characteristic of otherness as such, it only gets attached to certain bodies in social encounters and then sticks to them. The difference is produced in the encounter. Techniques of recognizing the other are partly built on historical conceptualizations and past recognitions (Ahmed 2000, 6–9). Ahmed explains that also multicultural openness can fall into the trap of fetishizing the other (Ahmed 2000, 95–107). Celebrating intercultural richness (e.g. diverse food options) still means recognizing certain cultures as different.

An encounter can move beyond fetishizing. For this we need to be aware of past encounters, of techniques of recognition, and of social processes, and of how these elements influence the encounter. Instead of aiming to grasp the other, we should focus on grasping the mode of encounter. This means two things: Accepting that parts of the person we are facing are ungraspable and uncommunicable (Ahmed 2000, 137–60). Second, asking: how did we get here?, and where can we go from here? (Ahmed 2000, 145).

This change of focus is where I bring in Meskimmon to define art as a tool to imagine and create new worlds and ways of being (2017). Art is constrained by the materials of the past but can invent new things out of them. Art is not only a key player in cultural imaginary and change, but also in building new communities. The act of creating together builds the concept

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of citizenship (Meskimmon 2017). In this light I aim to understand the artists reimagination and recreation of South Tyrol.

1.2 Situating South Tyrol

1.2.1 History informing Xenophobia

My research focuses on South Tyrol, a multicultural and trilingual border region in Northern Italy. This mostly trouble free co-living of multiple cultures is oftentimes cited as a model of interethnic crisis resolution (e.g. Peterlini 2023). However, its history of oppression and conflict contributes to South Tyrolean collective identification. A result is the ever-present *Andreas-Hofer-myth*, as Peterlini calls it, the desire/artificial need to defend South Tyrol from invaders (Peterlini 2011, 37) that is now being projected onto migrants (Peterlini 2011, 176). And the *Heimatmythos* (myth of home) that closely ties South Tyrolean cultures to the homeland. To explain the origin of these narratives, the next section will offer a short history of demographic changes and the evolution of the xenophobic defence discourse.

The origins of the *Andreas-Hofer-Myth* lie in 1809 when the freedom fighter Andreas Hofer organised an uprising against Napoleon's occupation of the Habsburgian county of Tyrol (encompassing the Austrian regions North Tyrol and East Tyrol, and the Italian regions South Tyrol and Trentino). Andreas Hofer, born in today's South Tyrol, gathered Tyroleans reminding them of the legal statue of the Landlibell[2] and their responsibility to defend their homeland (Peterlini 2023, 7). When Andreas Hofer was betrayed, captured, and executed, he turned into a national hero, a key figure in the myth of self-determined defence from outside threat (Peterlini 2011, 36). The riflemen association[3] carries on this tradition of Tyrolean military self-defence (Peterlini 2023, 7).

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[2] Landlibell is a document from 1511 that established Tyrol's responsibility to defend its own borders from external enemies, and its exemption from partaking in the military outside the own county (Peterlini 2023, 7).
[3] Riflemen see the Landlibell as their symbolic document of foundation. Their fundamental goals are the protection of Tyrolean freedom, homeland and culture (Bund der Tiroler Schuetzenkompanien, 2017).

After World War Two, the *Andreas-Hofer-Myth* was reused to symbolize South Tyrol's quest to free itself from Italy and its assimilation policies (Peterlini 2011, 37). In fact, after World War One, the Habsburg empire broke down, and South Tyrol and Trentino were given to Italy (Peterlini 2023, 13). Fascist troops demounted South Tyrolean cultural sites and symbols, Italianised place names, as well as German and Ladin family names, even on the tombstones. Fascism resulted in a collective trauma and increased the desire to protect homeland and culture from invaders (Peterlini 2023, 14–36). Moreover, demographics in South Tyrol changed. High numbers of Italians were resettled to South Tyrol to create an Italian majority (Peterlini 2023, 15–36), while South Tyrolean families resettled to Austria following the agreement of the Option[4] (Peterlini 2023, 46–50).

When the war ended, the *Andreas-Hofer-myth* came to symbolize the quest for South Tyrolean self-determination (Peterlini 2023, 63–64). Italy kept resettling Italians to South Tyrol with generous welfare funds. South Tyroleans felt excluded from the government subsidies and threatened by the new Italian citizens, perceived as the other. A similar narrative is now projected onto migrants (Peterlini 2011, 37). South Tyrolean citizens started to revolt and to protest. This tension culminated in the *Feuernacht* (Night of Fire) in 1961, a symbolic reference to Andreas Hofer. The *Feuernacht* led to negotiations that resulted in the acceptance of a conclusive South Tyrolean autonomy package in 1969 (Peterlini 2023, 119). This turned South Tyrol into what it is today: an autonomous, officially trilingual region in Northern Italy.

The conflict decreased. Leftist youth groups started building bridges between the Italian and the German population. South Tyrol caught up with development and tourism flourished. The German minority still felt a deep need to protect and delineate itself but got used to the new

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[4] The Option is a pact made by Hitler and Mussolini to not clash on the question of South Tyrol (German speaking in Italian territory): German speakers should be resettled to Germany or Austria, while the territory would remain Italian. South Tyroleans had the option to either leave and keep their culture, or to stay and become Italianized. Over 85% of the South Tyrolean population opted to relocate. Due to Italy's entry to the war, the number of those, who actually did, is much lower (Peterlini 2023, 46–50).

intercultural lifestyle (Peterlini 2023, 121; 130). With the economic flourishing in the 1990 the first labor migrants from Yugoslawia and North Africa settled in. The need for labor migrants hasn't ceased ever since (Marcher et al. 2022, 62). With the turn of the century the arrival of asylum seekers increased. Many arrive to Italy by boat and pass through South Tyrol with the aim to cross the Brenner Border but end up staying in South Tyrol (Carlà 2019, 14). In 2022, citizens without an Italian passport made up around 9,9% of the South Tyrolean population, about half of them have citizenship in another European country (Astat Info 2022). As I will explain next, the *Andreas-Hofer-myth* is now projected onto such foreigners (Peterlini 2023, 180).

1.2.2 Consociational System: Between Fixed and Intercultural Identities

The autonomy statute organizes today's minority protection system, a co-living of three distinct sociolinguistic groups (Carlà 2019, 14). South Tyrol is organized as a consociational power sharing system. Language groups are strictly separated in the school system, in organizations that structure social and cultural life (e.g. sports club, churches, …), and in media outlets, political parties etc. This creates strict boundaries that keep the linguistic groups apart to protect the different cultures present in the region (Wisthaler 2016, 1274). Additionally, this minority protection system furthers the understanding of cultures as fixed and distinct. This segregation was initially important because the German and Ladin speaking groups were afraid that Italy would attempt another assimilation sooner or later (Peterlini 2011, 17). However, many years of co-living resulted in the crossing of these borders, both institutionally (e.g. with bilingual newspapers, or the trilingual political green party Grüne/Verdi) and socially. For instance, the German dialect involves many words taken from the Italian vocabulary ('Migrationsreport Südtirol 2020' 2020, 20). Italian culture has integrated into South Tyrolean collective identity. Autonomy, multilingualism, and interculturality have become important elements of identification for South Tyrol (Peterlini 2023, 173).

Migrants, who move to South Tyrol, find themselves in this intercultural co-living of

three cultural/linguistic groups assumed to be distinct and fixed. Migrants do not fit into this interculturality yet and are recognized as the other. In fact, the fear of invasion, i.e. the *Andreas-Hofer-Myth*, shifted from being projected onto the figure of *the Italian* to the figure of *the Migrant* (Peterlini 2011, 176). This complicates inclusion. However, South Tyrol's interculturality also holds potential for the inclusion of migrants. As Peterlini put it, South Tyrolean identity implies ambiguity, the understanding that cultural identity is rarely a clear-cut entity, as well as the appreciation of intercultural diversity (Peterlini 2023, 173). Fostering awareness about this ambiguity and finding less nationalistic forms of belonging and identification, can facilitate the inclusion of migrants.

1.3 Methodology

This research can be defined as arts-based phenomenological qualitative research (Gupta and Zieske 2024). I conducted five in-depth interviews with artists and found the interviewees by asking around in my social network in South Tyrol. My only criteria were that the artists live in (South)Tyrol and that their art engaged with the theme of migration. I did not specifically search for artists with a migratory background, however, during the interviews, all five artists mentioned a sense of mobility in their personal or family history. The interviews were semi-structured and all between 30-60 minutes in length. The anonymity of artists was not possible since I mention specific art pieces, which are connected to these individuals. Since the artists are not a vulnerable population, I made this decision with their agreement. I analysed the data using an interpretative phenomenological analytical (IPA) approach as proposed by Smith and Pietkiewicz (2014). Following this method of analysis, I close read the interviews several times noting down everything that seemed relevant. Then, I identified the main themes and clustered them by grouping communal points. Out of these clusters I developed the subchapters of my analysis. Because IPA analysis is participant focused, I created short introductory chapters for each artist before engaging with the analysis of the interviews.

Regarding the interviews and their interpretation, as well as the highly qualitative nature of this research, I deem it important to make my positionality transparent. In addition, this thesis deals with a politically charged topic. Although I made sure to use bracketing during the interviews and their analysis, it is possible to read through my analysis my strong solidarity stance with regards to the humanitarian conditions of migration. This research has the purpose to facilitate and promote inclusion. Being a South Tyrolean provides me with the advantage to have a natural understanding of and compassion for South Tyrolean multiple collective identifications. Moreover, I conducted the interviews in the languages that my interview partners felt most comfortable in (German, Italian, French).

2 ARTISTS AND WORLDMAKING

In the following chapter I present and analyse the interviews by connecting them to my theoretical framework. Since my research is participant focused, I begin this chapter by introducing the interviewees in terms of who they are, how they got affiliated with the topic of migration, and how they engage with it through art and activism. Thereby, I shed light on concrete examples of worldmaking and help establish the artists as key figures in instigating social change. In the second part I argue that art is a key worldmaking tool due to its inherent imaginative and creative powers. An important element of this worldmaking is the ability of art to mediate communication and postmigrant encounters between peoples. In fact, art bypasses stereotypical categorisation through language, and finds creative metaphors of how we can live together. Lastly, I demonstrate that the artists found postmigrant ways of defining their own home, belonging, community and identity. They move away from nationalistic fixed understandings of those terms and towards more ambiguous identifications – this is a central aspect of building a more solidary South Tyrol.

2.1 Presentation of Interviewees

2.1.1 Ludwig Thalheimer

"How is something supposed to develop in society? If you exclude people and say don't leave the house. I say people have to meet each other, then there will be friction and then people will get to know each other and then the prejudices will be dismantled." [5]

Ludwig Thalheimer, working mainly as a photographer, was always interested in marginalised groups. He became affiliated with migration in 2014, when many refugees reached Bolzano, the capital of South Tyrol, by train. Everyone talked about it, some were afraid, others rushed to help. Ludwig observed that something interesting was happening and decided to document it. As I will explain later, this urge to process emotions that run through the self and the society seems to be a core trait of the artists activists I interviewed.

After persistent pressure he gained access to a refugee housing establishment. Ludwig conducted a photo-project with several asylum seekers. He bought little cameras and defined two rules: First, the participants had to decide for themselves, what they would take pictures of. Ludwig was interested in what they would find click-worthy. Second, Ludwig wanted the participants to go out in public and find objects there. Ludwig wanted to create visibility and encounter. He named the photo project *Here I am*, created booklets, one for each participant, in which the participants presented themselves through their pictures. Then he arranged the booklets in an exhibition space. Now Ludwig regularly calls farmers, company owners, and renters to mediate jobs and housing for refugees, who oftentimes struggle with xenophobic responses. What is interesting about Ludwig is that he explains his involvement as a simple humanitarian stance, an affectionate approach, hoping that this attitude will spread through society. This is emblematic for my take on art for affect and encounter.

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[5] Ludwig Thalheimer, interview conducted in Bolzano/Bozen by the author, April 2, 2024. This quote as well as the following quotes were loosely translated by the author.

2.1.2 Manar Lardjane

"It seems to me that it is really important that such a work is regarded in the same way as Andreas Hofer, for example. Djamila is as important as Andreas Hofer, to say it stupidly." [6]

Manar studies at the university of Innsbruck, a main city in the Austrian part of Tyrol, her family lives in Brixen, South Tyrol. With the *Organisation Eine Welt* (Organisation One World) Manar recently published a booklet about the life of Djamila Bouhired, a key figure in Algerian colonial resistance. With Djamila, Manar wants to counter the stereotype of the passive Muslim woman. In fact, Djamilla is a strong female leader. She is not oppressed, silenced or incapable of agency. Further, she is not a terrorist, even if French history sources like to portray her as such. Manar got involved with the topic of migration and xenophobia when she herself experienced islamophobia in school after the attacks of *Charlie Hebdo*. Manar's activist focus lies on differentiating narratives and raising awareness about the colonial history of Algeria. She now goes from school to school and talks about colonialism and the subjectivity of historical narrative. As I see it, with her book, Manar uses material of the past to build a new future - just as it is described by Meskimmon (2011, 192).

2.1.3 Eric Bayala Kibidoué

"I say, migration, it's a meeting of cultures. What should I put in a common pot? I wanted to see what we have in common and to learn and exchange with others…So I've seen that instruments also translate identity, melodies. Medical musical harmonies translate an identity, a way of seeing the world." [7]

Eric Bayala Kibidoué is a filmmaker (amongst other things) living in Innsbruck. Similarly to Ludwig, Eric observed migration becoming a heated topic in Europe. He visited a refugee camp close to Vienna and was shocked. He got involved as an activist and cofounded *Verein Sahel Tirol* that provides legal support for asylum claims. Eric used his guitar and voice to raise money to pay the lawyers involved in this organization. Soon, he realized the potential of art for

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[6] Manar Lardjane, interview conducted in Bressanone/Brixen by the author, March 30, 2024
[7] Eric Bayala Kibidoué, interview conducted in Innsbruck by the author, April 6, 2024

intercultural encounters. Eric started directing documentaries exploring how cultures meet and communicate. Art can be used in many ways, to denounce, to narrate, to feel, but most interestingly to him, as a means of communication. Art creates metaphors that show us how we can live together in an intercultural space. It is much easier to communicate through music, art, and food. In my analysis, Eric's interest exemplifies this potential of art to mediate the encounter of cultures and imagine new ways of living together.

2.1.4 Matteo de Cecchi

"We are already in a different, changed world. That is, the melting pot of culture already exists, so it's like trying to stop the flooding river, you don't stop it. Resisting will just make it harder for us to find a good way to live together." [8]

Matteo is a founding member of *Bozen Solidale*, an organization that aids asylum seekers and homeless people, and *Spazio Autogestito 77*, a self-managed social centre. He manages the Facebook site for *Bozen Solidale* and writes political articles for several online media outlets. When I asked him why he writes, he explained that the political system as well as racism and xenophobia in South Tyrol make it difficult for new citizens to get documents, find housing and a job, and that it is important to denounce these things. Matteo is also involved in street politics, but digital media is a good tool to reach a wider audience. This work is difficult, as he had to face, in his words, "racist shitstorms"[9] on several of his postings. Matteo thinks that the most important message for South Tyrol is that intercultural diversity is already a reality. With his denunciation of wrongdoings and his advocacy for postmigrant solidarity Matteo's interview sheds light on the political realm of artist activism.

2.1.5 Cecilia Munoz

"It's not really important what you talk about. It's about the storytelling itself, because when you narrate, I know you, I know your feelings, maybe you remember your mom, I don't know your mom, however I know your sensitivity. I get to know

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[8] Matteo de Cecchi, interview conducted in Bolzano/Bozen by the author, April 9, 2024
[9] De Cecchi interview, Bolzano/Bozen, April 9, 2024

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your world." [10]

Cecila Munoz says that her personal vital urgencies are fostering interculturalism and supporting mothers. To act for those urgencies, she cofounded an organization called *Mafalda*, for which she worked for over 20 years. Now Cecila works autonomously mostly as a storyteller. She creates spaces and events for people to meet through the stories they tell, and by working towards a common goal. One of the projects, in which she realizes that vision, is called *Raccontiamo-Ci* (Let's tell Us). It is a group talk to which she brings topic prompts (e.g. bread) to let people tell stories about themselves. Another meet-up circles around the question "How to make Merano[11] more convivial?", another group is called *Maternare* (Mothering) and brings together mothers (and some fathers) to share their experiences with parenting. Cecilia touches on the topic of art as a tool for fostering affect and empathy. Moreover, with her take on stories, that are made of the past, but contain future vision, she epitomizes what I, following Meskimmon (2017), identified as the core trait of art: It's worldmaking power.

2.2 The Power of Art and the World it Creates

2.2.1 Art as Imagination and Creation

In my introduction, I argued that artists are key players in bringing about social change to a postmigrant solidary society. Through the interviews I learned that art is worldmaking because of its power to imagine a beyond the material constrains of the present (Meskimmon 2017, 26). Similarly, Hall argues that identity involves both past (consolidation) and future (change) elements (1990). Manar's work and her focus on background stories and (neo)colonialism can be analysed in terms of that temporal realm. By changing the way we engage with the past, we can engender new ways of being. As Ahmed explains, a critical engagement with the past, in specific past recognitions of the other, is crucial. We need to understand how we got here, how

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[10] Cecilia Munoz, interview conducted in Bressanone/Brixen by the author, April 30, 2024
[11] Merano is a bigger city in South Tyrol

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past as well as present social processes influence the encounter (Ahmed 2000, 145). According to Manar, South Tyroleans often feel detached from colonial atrocities forgetting that South Tyroleans fought against Ethiopia in the Italian army. The Eurocentricity of South Tyrolean education shocks her at times. Two years of World War Two in high school, she remembers, but only one week of colonialism and only from the European perspective. Manar wants to change that. These stories are important, and they have equal worth, she says, "we have to tell them!"[12] She argues that colonial and neocolonial exploitation are strong push factors for migration. Spreading awareness about these injustices, as well as the stories that people bring with them when they do, is therefore an important aspect of moving towards a postmigrant understanding of society.

Ludwig explained to me how sometimes stories of the past come in, when he spends time with asylum seekers, and he listens to them. He, however, prefers to focus on the future and on building the life that is envisioned. Similarly, for Cecilia storytelling involves a move from the past to the future. Memories help us explain ourselves to others. They are stories from the past that make up who we are. Simultaneously, we recall them because of their future element. Stories always contain an element of vision and imagination. Once a reality is imagined through stories or through other pieces of art, it can be enacted and become reality. In this point Cecilia is congruent with Meskimmon's claims. Art is an active agent. Not just a mere reflection of the past. It can materialize the future (Meskimmon 2017, 26).

What also comes up is the fundamentality of the connection of art and activism. Cecilia claims that getting active is as important as imagination and protest. When we see injustice, we should get together, denounce it, imagine a better way of doing it, and implement it into society. All interviewees fit within this pattern as individuals, who are working to illustrate injustice through their artistic practice. I found the artists through the criterium that they make art about

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[12] Manar interview, Bressanone/Brixen, March 30, 2024

migration, their activist involvement was of no concern to me. However, all my interviews are engaged in social activism. Most of them founded associations of support, the others are involved privately. Through activism art turns into worldmaking.

2.2.2 Art Mediating Encounters

An encompassing aspect of art-activism is the mediation of encounters. Art is a tool to create connections with people around us, to narrate the complexities of realities, to break down stereotypes, to find consensus and to create a common spirit in the intercultural space.

Ludwig, for example, radically went against the seclusive approach used by centres for accommodation. The segregation is an inherent part of South Tyrol's social system and is used on new citizens as well. This segregation, however, does not favour the coming together of different social groups. For Ludwig it was important to make his photography participants go out and engage with the world. Only thereby people can meet, and stereotypes can be deconstructed. The countering of stereotypes seems to be an important first step. This is what Manar aims to do with the portrayal of a strongly engaged Muslim woman. Ludwig understands himself and his art as catalysers. He wants to make encounters possible, give the people tools to present themselves. The exhibition itself was a form of encounter, where Ludwig centered asylum seekers and their experiences, bringing them from the margins into the spotlight. With the cameras, he gave them tools to present themselves to the visitors. He created a space to meet and a prompt (the photo pamphlets) to talk about. An encounter is all it takes, "everything else happens on its own"[13], he explained. For example, job opportunities that arose during the exhibition were unintended. They just were a natural consequence of people meeting. What he loves most is when a farmer, who he first had to convince to try hiring a non-European, calls him back after a few weeks and is beyond satisfied. Once they know each other, Ludwig explains, they will greet each other differently on the street. The whole approach changes, the

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[13] Ludwig interview, Bolzano/Bozen, April 2, 2024

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first ice is broken. There is respect and amicability. Ludwig hopes that this has a contagious effect. One farmer sees how satisfied the other is and decides to try it as well. Art in this case is the mediator that brought about the encounter.

2.2.3 Encounters and Affect

A second aspect of encounter is generating affect. For Eric, artists are citizens able to observe their own emotions as well as the ones from others around them, because they are people, who listen, watch, and feel. In his documentary *Zeitdreher*innen* (Time Turners) he depicted role of artists in accommodating refugees and immigrants (Bayala 2021). He observed that in 2014/15 migration became more visible to the public eye. Private people mobilized, founded associations, opened shelters etc. and, interestingly, reflected artistically on what they observed and felt. According to Eric, artists process emotions by putting them into their art. Ludwig's initial involvement with migration is exemplary for that. According to Meskimmon, art allows to move and to be moved (Meskimmon 2011, 194). Most of my interviewees told me stories of witnessing or experiencing discrimination, how the experiences moved them and compelled them to act. By engaging with emotions like fear, repulsion, and disgust, art can foster empathy instead of rejection.

Matteo told me about the difficulties of the digital space, including the hate that is spread and used to polarize people online. He mentioned the racist hate-speech he had to face on several of his posts. In one of his articles, he brought his opinion to the point by criticizing the reaction of media and politics to an episode, in which an asylum seeker had a psychic crisis and turned violent against some cars. One newspaper posted the article about the event three times in a row and described it as terror in the streets. The city mayor demanded the immediate expulsion of the man and armament of police. Matteo commented that we should condemn the violent act of course, but mostly be concerned for the mental health of our co-citizen (concitadino) instead of turning him into an object of hate (De Cecchi and Kola 2019).

Cecilia focuses on the power of art to foster compassion. She claims that stories, used

since the beginning of humanity, are an easy way to really get to know other people. Listening to someone's tone of voice, choice of words and topic will bring us straight to the heart of that person. We can connect with others through stories because stories are like mirrors, she says. Why are we moved by the child with a hunger belly telling us that its parents don't have money to pay the school fees, but not by the migrant, who lives on the street, because he cannot find job and housing? Because we don't know his story. Cecilia's words are congruent with Ahmed's argument that when listening to the other (also through art) we are touched by the person in front of us. We become aware of the many things that cannot get across. Ahmed stressed that another person's life story can never be fully grasped. Many elements are left out in an encounter because they are uncommunicable. We have to be aware about the things missing in the encounter, only this way we can move beyond othering and fetishizing. She stressed the importance of the mode of encounter (Ahmed 2000, 137–60).

2.2.4 Art as a Means of Communication

Eric claims, that in fact, art is a mode of encounter. It not only fosters communication of cultures, but it is in fact a culture/means of communication beyond language. As I see it, when we communicate through art (for example by jamming) we can bypass recognizing the person in front of us as the other. The encounter happens on the same eyelevel (e.g. musician meeting musician) and is distant from societal processes and dynamics (e.g. categorization through language). This is exemplified once again by Cecilia's story telling groups. Stories seem to make it able to connect on a deeper level, and to recognize the speakers simply as the individuals they are.

Other metaphors for art as a means/culture of communication can be found in Eric's film *Der Widerklang der Seele* (Echo of the Soul). Eric shows that melodies and instruments carry identities and can be matched with others. Through music, laughs, food, and art it is much easier to mix what we bring into the intercultural room. When jamming, musicians can find commonalities and differences, mix local traditional melodies and transform them into

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something shared (Bayala 2017). This point is stressed by Meskimmon, who explains that such a collective identification beyond nationality does not mean identification with a disembodied homogeneous identity. It is rather the interplay of personal and shared cultural elements (Meskimmon 2017, 28). Eric's narrative exemplifies how artists imagine new ways of bringing together a community that builds an intercultural space for home.

2.2.5 Citizenship

A key point of argumentation in this thesis is that artistic advocacy for migration is closely connected to the artists finding new ways of defining their belonging to South Tyrol and its community. It is apparent that the artists move away from understanding community as made up by shared language and a clearly defined culture. The artists are already quite aware of South Tyrol's postmigrant reality. Matteo brought it to the point when he said that the impact of new citizens cannot be thought away anymore and when he claimed that we should regard the man with the violent episode as a co-citizen (De Cecchi and Kola, Ermira 2019). What is less clear for the artists is what form future citizenship and collective South Tyrolean identity will take. In fact, that is an open-ended question to be explored through practice. Art is about creating encounters, participating in common goals with open arms, ears, and respect. The community that will arise from that is difficult to define. This form of building a collective identity goes well with Meskimmon's take on citizenship as a performative practice. By interacting, the very concept of citizenship is imagined and materialized (Meskimmon 2017, 29).

A good example of the above is Cecilia's meeting group that revolves around the question how to turn Merano into a more convivial city. By engaging together in storytelling and creative imagination, the participants perform collective citizenship. Another metaphor for this is yet again the music making documented by Eric in his film *Widerklang der Seele* (Echo of the Soul). Musicians jam and thereby engage in a form of community/world making (Bayala 2017). Eric explained that musicians create another form of belonging, without leaving behind their personal (musical) identities. He defined the intercultural space as a space of invention

and consensus. A space of common spirit that can be a great source of creativity. Cecilia made a similar statement when she claimed that diversity brings great creativity, that it will just take some time until that richness is visible. She added that xenophobia comes down to fear of cultural identity loss, especially in the German speaking population of South Tyrol.

2.2.6 Identity and Belonging

As I stated in my history chapter, South Tyrolean cultural identity is informed by the need to protect its three official cultures from perceived invaders (i.e. xenophobia). As Peterlini showed, South Tyrol's traumatic history of cultural oppression still informs the present attitude with cultural identity (Peterlini 2011, 36). For these reasons, I was particularly interested in understanding how the artists engage with their own understanding of belonging and identification with South Tyrol. And in fact, the move away from identifying with a nationalistic and fixed culture is very visible in all interviewees. They all understand identity as something fluid and ambiguous.

Manar defines her belonging through her community, family, and friends, rather than through the land. Home is an ambiguous term for her, and she can now accept that one does not have to belong anywhere specific. Additionally, the process of researching for the book strengthened her connection to her Algerian heritage, and also brought about a rupture with the utopian vision of Europe as "free, fraternal, glittery"[14]. Manar was shocked by the atrocities committed by Europe, and by the French sources, that presented Djamila as a terrorist.

The experience was very similar for Ludwig, who met closed walls, hate, and racism when trying to mediate jobs and housing for his new acquaintances. Through this work he got to know better this closed off South Tyrolean mentality, the rejection of everything that is perceived as strange, the self-centred navel-gazing, the "this is our land" narrative. It shocked him. In addition, the new friendships he gained through his work made him grow as a person.

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[14] Manar interview, Bressanone/Brixen, March 30, 2024

They forced him to engage with his own stereotypes and elements of othering that he still sometimes observes in himself.

Similarly, Eric told me that his identity is mostly constructed by the people and places he met throughout his life. For example, one big part of his identity now is the family of artists he met through the making of his documentaries. Cecilia explained that her identity is constantly under construction, that many episodes in her live triggered changes. She mentioned her connection to the Araucaria tree to exemplify that identities can neither be lost nor held stable. In fact, she defines herself as a South Tyrolean, but whenever she runs across an Araucaria tree (holy tree in Patagonia) she feels connected, due to her Argentinian roots. This is a metaphor to explain that her roots will stay intact throughout the addition and transformation of identitarian elements - her answer to the South Tyrolean fear of identity loss.

2.2.7 Home

Reimagining our understanding of home is another important element in the movement to a more open and solidary community. As explained above, home is a loaded concept in South Tyrol. The *Heimatmythos* explains how tightly homeland and culture are connected (Peterlini 2011). Leaving behind such a fixed and place-bound understanding of home can turn South Tyrol more inclusive towards migrants. Ludwig mentioned the *Heimatmythos* specifically and added that he always had an ambiguous relationship with South Tyrolean homeland. He does not feel like he could have any claims to the land. His grandfather and father, he explained, were Jewish. After World War Two they settled in South Tyrol, where his grandmother was from. He therefore does not feel like an "Alteingessessener"[15] (long-term resident). He struggles to understand that mentality. Matteo developed a critical relation to the words *Heimat* and *Patria* (Homeland in German and Italian). For him they are loaded with notions of nationalism.

Eric and Cecilia found new ways of understanding home. Eric explained that home is

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[15] Thalheimer, interview, Bolzano/Bozen, April 2, 2024

wherever he feels good and is free to express himself. Innsbruck is home for him, but Paris as well. His roots are mobile, he said, he carries them on his head, like the Baobab tree, a tree that looks like it has its roots on its head. Eric has mobile roots and an identity under construction. Cecilia understands the earth as her home. She walks on it calling it home wherever she is. She knows that she is entitled to be here, that she belongs. Understanding that we are all at home here and everywhere, for her, is another important element of inclusion.

All of these engagements with home conform to Meskimmon's understanding of citizenship as moving beyond identification with soil and blood (Meskimmon 2017, 33). The artist's interactions with the concepts of home and belonging become malleable, positively ambiguous. Thereby, they create possibilities for engendering a collective inclusive community and for reimagining South Tyrol.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored the question how artists, who engage with the topic of migration, reimagine, and thereby engender new visions of South Tyroleanness, specifically notions of community, home, and belonging. Further, I wanted to understand how art can be used for social postmigrant change, an important transition that South Tyrol (as many other communities in Europe) must go through. The topic is particularly interesting in South Tyrol because of the region's history and myths of self-determined defence. As Peterlini stated, nationalistic identifications, the *Heimatmythos* and the *Andreas-Hofer-Myth* are present in today's society. I sought to explore how art plays a key role in instigating social change, and that artists engaging with the topic of migration move away from blood-soil-bound identifications. Attending to migration and community making, in this case, is both a challenge and an opportunity for South Tyrol to transform into a more solidary postmigrant society.

As part of the qualitative research for the thesis, I interviewed five artists, who live in (South) Tyrol and engage in the topic of migration and interculturality. Through the interview analysis it has become apparent that art is a key tool for moving towards a postmigrant society. Mostly, because of its power to imagine and create new ways of being together as a community. As my interviewees showed, art is a key worldmaking tool because of its power to imagine new ways of being and to engender them in society. Another important element is the mediation of encounters between social groups. Through art we can bypass othering and fetishizing because it offers many ways of communicating beyond language (e.g. music, photos, etc). Art helps meeting the person in front of us in a non-prejudiced way. Moreover, art is able to instigate affect and empathy.

The second part of my analysis showed that through the coming together to participate in an artistic endeavour, new forms of community and belonging can arise. Such new forms of community involve both elements of individual and of shared culture. This relates to my

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expectation that artists focusing on migration would find more ambiguous forms of identification. Indeed, the artists had very open understandings of home and belonging. Their understanding of South Tyrol showed a clear move away from nationalistic thinking as defined by Anderson (Anderson 1983).

As the first research of its kind to examine in detail the role of artists in instigating social change in South Tyrol, this thesis combined new areas of research like postmigration theory and art, and art-based phenomenology. It gave first insights into understanding how artists imagine and create new worlds and communities by engaging with the topic of migration.

The role of art in postmigrant social change is an interesting and fruitful topic to be explored in further research. For instance, South Tyrol is a small region with a very specific history. The same research might look very different if conduced in a capital city or a place with strong diaspora communities. Within South Tyrol, further research could explore the communities that arise from these artistic practices and study how they engage with/recreate South Tyrol, and whether this practice helps countering social segregation. The field is vast and of vital urgency, how my interview partner Cecilia would put it.

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