

Research article

Imagined encounters, transformative potentials

On desired encounters within an Arab Artist Collective in Vienna

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Encounters do not start with physical meetings, but rather with the affective attributions of producing or developing knowledge of another person in advance of meeting them. Certain encounters are more desired than others, solidifying pre-conceived notions of difference or helping to divert them. Even encounters that have not (yet) happened can create an affective space filled with strong emotions such as fear or desire. It is the affective complexity of just such an unrealistic encounter that this article addresses, based on fieldwork amongst a Vienna-based Arab collective of artists. Consisting largely of artists who were recently arrived as forced migrants, the collective sought to overcome the power asymmetry inscribed in their day-to-day interactions by creating new forms of artistic engagement with the Austrian public. As I discuss, this desire came to influence their self-understanding, event planning, and internal knowledge production. By focusing on the potentiality inherent in encounters, this contribution asks how the imagining of desired encounters shapes subjectivities even when those encounters have not (yet) materialised.

Keywords: encounter; difference; refugee studies; integration; affect

Möten startar inte med fysiska träffar, utan snarare med de affektiva processer genom vilka olika attribut produceras eller kunskap om en annan person innan mötet äger rum. Vissa möten är mer eftertraktade än andra, och vissa förstärker föreställningar om skillnad medan andra bidrar till att lösa upp dem. Även möten som (ännu) inte inträffat kan skapa ett affektivt rum fyllt med starka känslor, som rädsla eller begär. Det är den affektiva komplexiteten i just ett sådant möte som den här artikeln behandlar, grundat på fältarbete i ett Wien-baserat arabiskt konstnärskollektiv. Kollektivet, som främst bestod av konstnärer som nyligen hade anlant genom ofrivillig migration, försökte överkomma maktasymmetrier som fanns inbyggda i deras vardagsinteraktioner, genom att skapa nya former av konstnärliga engagemang med den österrikiska allmänheten. Som jag diskuterar så kom detta begär att påverka deras självförståelse, evenemangsplanering och interna kunskapsproduktion. Genom att fokusera på den potentialitet som finns inneboende i möten frågar sig detta bidrag hur föreställningar om eftertraktade möten skapar subjektiviteter även när dessa möten (ännu) inte skett.

Nyckelord: möte; skillnad; flyktstudier; integration; affekt

On International Women's Day, I visited an event organised by an Arab artist collective (referred to hereafter as "the Collective") with whom I had done research over the previous two years. The program for the event consisted of a poetry reading and vernissage in a small room atop a trendy winery in one of the most vibrant student quarters of Vienna. Around 60 people, all members of the Collective, attended the event hosted by a young, veiled woman in a traditional Austrian *Dirndl*. Most of the presenters were wearing other folk costumes. While the event was held entirely

in Arabic, the presenters addressed a non-present Austrian audience in their greetings and introductions. While the Collective had meticulously planned the event to engage the Austrian public and change an often negative public discourse about Arabs in Austria, the fact that no Austrians showed up at the event was a true frustration point. The Collective had hoped for an intercultural encounter to help break stereotypes and change their position in society. Years of cultivating this imagined encounter had preceded the event, filled with hopes, wishes, and fears as well as internal

restructuring, censorship, and remodelling within the Collective. Even though the wished-for meeting did not materialise, the desire of such effectively altered the Collective in the years leading up to the event. In this article, I investigate the complex relation between desired (but not-materialised) encounters and their potential for transformation through ethnographic fieldwork conducted amongst an artist collective in Vienna, Austria between 2018 and 2020.

Aim and research question

Against this background, the aim of the article is to investigate how such an imagined and not yet materialised encounter unfolds. To do so, I unpack the relationship between how an encounter is imagined and the potential for change that is inherent in the act of imagining such an encounter. How can an imagined encounter develop a potential for change, and why does this occur?

To explore these questions, I begin by introducing the Collective and their ideas for engaging the Austrian public. After describing the material and providing the theoretical lens, I discuss encounter theory as it concerns the transformative potential of imagined encounters through their influence on knowledge production and the creation of affective spaces.

Background and context: The Arab Artist Collective in Vienna

The Collective was established in 2017 by a group of Arab artists, some long-time Vienna residents but mostly forced migrants from the wars in Syria and Iraq. Appalled by the dominant stereotype of poorly educated and under-resourced refugees that dominated Austrian public discourse during the 2010s, and connected by their artistic practices, they founded the *Viennese Arab Artist Collective*.¹ The term “Arab”, should not be understood as an ethnic self-description but a commitment to an imagined “Arab art” that would include certain stylistic elements and a fluency in the Arabic language, whether or not it was one’s family language. Consisting mainly of well educated, (pre-displacement) middle to upper middle-class individuals, the Collective aimed to change Austrian discourse about Arabs in the country and portray the richness of Arab culture to the Austrian public. In doing so, there was a particular focus on reaching other artists and intellectuals.

While most of the artists’ daily interactions with other residents of Austria was limited to bureaucratic and service-sector interactions at that point, the Collective closely followed Austrian media and what were then conservative and right-wing dominated political debates and the policies these resulted in. These served as harsh

¹ The name is partially changed. The term “Arab” is used here, since it is also part of the original name.

everyday reminders of Collective members’ refugeeness, what Liisa Malkki describes as “a way of understanding the particular subjective experience [of the refugee] in relation to existing policies” (1995: 497). Despite most of the members’ higher social status prior to their displacement, there were significant challenges to reattaining this desirable social status due to prejudice and integration policies that provided limited financial support and placed strict preconditions on employment. The Collective’s self-defined “mission” to change public image could therefore be seen as partially produced through the position into which members were forced by their encounter with Austrian social and political discourse, as well as their subjective experiences of refugeeness (see Dobson 2004, Jackson & Bauder 2013).

It was within this context that the Collective consciously developed their own strategy of outreach. Different to the earlier discussions of the Collective, by 2020 sensitive topics like politics and religion were avoided. Austrian artists, authors, and other figures of Viennese intellectual life were regularly invited to discussions and vernissages; members of the Collective whose German was good enough gladly offered to provide simultaneous translation. Unfortunately, during my almost two years of attending these meetings, only one artist that the Collective considered “Austrian” became a regular attendee. Although not an Austrian myself, I was also considered a representative of the Austrian public because of my employment with an Austrian research institution.

Method and material

The material analysed in this article was collected as part of AUSARAB, a project investigating Austro-Arab encounters. The Collective was just one of the Arab community groups with whom research was conducted as part of this. As a member of this project team, I attended the Collective’s events on a regular basis between 2018 and 2020, taking part in discussions and offering translation support as needed. Prior to this project, I had already come to know several members through other projects dating as far back as 2015. With many of the members at the Collective, formal interviews had therefore already been conducted prior to this project. Whereas earlier research had resulted in five extended qualitative interviews and many group discussions, the majority of research for the AUSARAB project primarily involved participant observation at the Collective’s regular meetings, and informal conversations over coffee or via chat groups and Facebook. It also included collective discussions with members on topics of identity and their position within the Austrian public.² Because some members

² Prior to this most recent research, which included many co-research elements, more “classic” forms of research had been conducted by the research team on earlier projects where some of the same participants were involved. This included 500 quantitative interviews on values and expectations in 2015, 66 qualitative interviews for the LODA study (2015–2017), 12 qualitative interviews for a City of Vienna study on

had become close acquaintances over the years, I also visited them at home or accompanied them to religious services and celebrations. Some Collective members became advisers on research design and sparring partners in analysing and writing about the Austro-Arab encounter. Within the course of research, the Collective also became co-research partners for a follow up study on COVID-19. In some cases, collaboration with individual artists resulted in publications and academic events. This intense fieldwork and continuous exchange, including a group discussion on the findings on the imagined encounter explored here, are at the basis of the analysis that follows.

Theoretical framework: The encounter perspective

In my analysis of the imagined encounter between the Viennese Arab Artist Collective and an imagined Austrian public, I build upon what my colleague and AUSARAB principal investigator Leonardo Schiocchet has previously referred to as *the encounter perspective* (Schiocchet et.al. 2020b). Since becoming part of his team in 2018, I have extended his concept by drawing on the transformative potential of encounters that have not yet materialised (Schiocchet et.al. 2020a). Admittedly, we would not be the first to theorise an “encounter” in anthropological research – Talal Asad (1973) used this term much earlier, though mainly to denote the unequal meeting between colonising anthropologists of the British Empire and their hosts, by which the former received access to information about colonised societies due to their relative positions of power (1973: 16). In fact, the term “encounter” has been used by authors of various disciplines, often denoting a meeting or interaction between two or more entities. Yet, in most cases, there is a common belief that an encounter needs to involve at least two people or groups that are considered “different” or “not the same” by at least one party (see also Faier & Rofel 2014: 363). This difference should not be considered as given, however; it is socially and historically produced.

For the AUSARAB research team, we have conceptualised the encounter as a “framework to understand and portray the asymmetric embeddedness of ideas, representations, values, dispositions, and affects across different social groups to discuss how worldviews and social practices are shaped and to assess how encounters have affected the social actors involved” (Schiocchet et al. 2020a: 4). Schiocchet first developed the encounter perspective within his research on the Austro-Palestinian encounter (May 2015 – June 2017) and the context of a

strongly hegemonic understanding of “refugee integration” that was dominating Austrian discourse at the time. Because “integration” is a heavily laden political concept in Austria and Europe more broadly, it was not suitable for understanding the meeting between Arab refugees and their self-positioning in Austria. By contrast, “encounter” serves as a less politicised frame through which to approach the meeting of different groups, drawing on various connections and influences that lead to the situation of contact. As such a frame, it also provides an entry point into the analysis of the influence of “different worldviews on each other upon contact”. The “encounter” makes it possible to investigate this influence without taking for granted “the normative imperative of fitting one to the other’s standards” (Schiocchet 2017:10).

More than just renaming the meeting of refugees and others, “encounter” can also provide a methodological tool. Here, I build on Philip Fountain’s (2016) application of the concept. Instead of a focus on a group, Fountain avoids reification or essentialisation by putting the meeting of different individuals to the foreground. In his analysis, the “encounter” becomes the entry point into the understanding of trajectories, similar to the Extended Case Method (see e.g., Burawoy 1998). These trajectories reach into the past, and the history that formed and framed the encounter, as well as into the present and future through the possibilities into which these trajectories might develop (see Fountain 2016). My own contribution to Fountain’s conceptualisation is to consider these trajectories in light of knowledge production and affective spaces.

Knowledge production and the encounter

Even before a meeting, the grounds for interaction are often solidified, and the frames and conditions set. As Asad (1973) describes in his iconic volume on the influence of the global colonial power asymmetry on anthropological thought and practice, British Social Anthropology and its complicity with colonial world views influenced the knowledge produced about the colonies. As he argues, much of this knowledge was based on a politically motivated hegemonic worldview, and not on actual meetings and interactions, in order to create a reality of difference. By understanding this “difference” or “not-sameness” (see Faier & Rofel 2014: 363) as evolving through a previous social production of knowledge, it is possible to see how engagement with a group by imagining them, precedes and influences actual person-to-person encounters. Accompanied by anticipations and assumptions about the other, and possible outcomes of meeting, knowledge about the other is constantly produced and reformulated. This social knowledge is never neutral but evaluated against moral imaginations. Yet, with the idea of “difference” established, a (possible) encounter also creates an

transnational nodal points (2018). A subsequent study on COVID-19 (2020) included 60 surveys and 6 qualitative interviews with Arab institutions in Vienna. While not all participants were part of every study, the continuous presence of myself and other members of our research team gave legitimacy to our work within the Arabic speaking community in Vienna and sparked interest for exchange.

affective space³ that is filled with sensitivities, emotions, and expectations placed upon or associated with the respective other group.

Encounters and affective spaces

To explore how knowledge production plays a role in the creation and evolution of affective spaces, Sara Ahmed (2010), Seighworth and Gregg (2010), and Stenner and Clinch (2013) provide helpful insights. Encounters can be feared, avoided or desired, depending on how the people involved imagine their outcome. As the imagined outcome influences the affective space, it also acts upon the rules and scripts for the encounter. The affective space “can in fact provide the conditions for personal and social transformation” (Stenner & Clinch 2013), through the constant plasticity and re-formulation of knowledge about the “other”. An affective resonance thus results from this knowledge production about an imagined other (Seighworth & Gregg 2010:1). As Sara Ahmed observes, “[t]o be affected by something is to evaluate that thing”, and through this evaluation, people “turn towards something” which in turn creates “affective interest” (2010: 23–25). For Ahmed affect is something “sticky”, an attachment to an idea or value (2010:29). Hence, when space becomes affective space, it is filled with strong connotations, personal affections, panic, or even fear attached to ideas about “the other”.

Ahmed emphasises that affect also holds the possibility of something more. As something future-oriented, it incorporates “maybes” and hypothetical alternatives, and is fed by fantasies and imagining done prior to a physical encounter. Affect thus has a temporal dimension, distinct from other modalities of daily life. It is because of this that a focus on encounters as affective spaces makes it possible to analyse them beyond the confines of the physical space in which a meeting occurs.

Encounters and the production of knowledge

Coming back to the Viennese Arab Artist Collective, contextual background about the late 2010s in Austria is helpful to understand the knowledge production that occurred within the group. According to regular comments made in discussions and meetings, members of the Collective were discontent with being portrayed as threats to Austrian culture or as resourceless victims, both of which were common themes in refugee-related discourses at the time. In general, being portrayed as the notorious “other” in public discourse was very unsettling to most. This came to the fore in 2020, when I intended to lead discussions on how refugees experienced the pandemic in Austria. I was confronted with my own assumption that they might have experienced it different

than other people. I was cautioned by one of the artists as they explained:

You should not ask such questions. With these, you just affirm the differentiation of refugees and Austrians that is already there. We don't want that. We want to be seen as the same. We are the same. (Personal Communication, 5 April 2020)

As this comment shows, there was a clear interest in changing public discourse and a view of refugees as inherently “different” – helpless victims, uncivilised villains, or simply “others”.

Since 2015, public discourse in Austria on refugee-ness and forced migration has been strongly influenced by opposing dynamics. On the one side, already existing leftist solidarity movements and the No Borders movement became more outspoken, politicising people who had not been political beforehand. The emergence of “Willkommenskultur” as a concept prominently shaped the time of arrival of thousands of refugees in the second half of 2015 (see Forschungszentrums Österreichisches Deutsch (2016)). Humanitarian logic, slogans, and organisations were active throughout Austria, with refugees becoming emblematic “victims” who had to be saved by their Austrian volunteer rescuers. The focus on “victimhood” (see Bauer-Amin 2017) became so prominent that self-organised art events could quickly be overlooked if they did not fit this Zeitgeist.

On the other side of the spectrum, the populist front in Austria, which had undergone various waves in popularity, had a revival in the second half of the 2010s. The sheer numbers of refugees arriving in 2015, combined with images of chaos and confusion at Viennese train stations and the border crossings at Spielfeld and Nickelsdorf, as well as coverage of sexual assaults in Cologne, Germany on New Year's Eve that same year, were each weaponised by populists to feed public fear and anxiety (see Schiocchet et al. 2020b: 91–92). A fear of change and transformation that would come through the encounter with Arab refugees, portrayed as “conservative”, “violent”, or “backwards”, drove segments of Austria's electorate into the arms of right-wing populists who portrayed themselves as the saviours of the “Occident”. Convenient for them, indeed, was, that elements of the threat of the siege of Vienna by the Ottoman Empire still lingered in Austrian cultural memory, and was readily mobilised when needed for political gain (see Heiss & Feichtinger 2009). In the context of this fear of Arab refugees as religious fanatics and fundamentalists, little association was made with the thriving cultural scenes of Damascus, Erbil, or Basra, much less the existing Arab cultural scene in Vienna.

This subjection to stereotypes was not exclusive to the experience of members of the Collective, but was comparable with experiences of displaced people

³ I use Sara Ahmed's definition of affect as “how we are touched by what we are near” (2010: 2).

elsewhere. (see e.g. Chossière 2021). Repeatedly being painted as “different” or “other” was seen as particularly problematic by the Collective – one of the most significant challenges to (re-)building their lives in Austria; it therefore needed to be strategically confronted. While themes of “home”, “home-sickness”, “loneliness”, and “memories” played a major role in early exhibitions, the themes soon changed to address topics that people without experiences of displacement or refugeeness could also relate to. A tendency to underline “sameness” over any perceived “difference” became an underpinning of internal and external actions of the Collective.

Consistent with the shift from experiences of difference towards more relatable themes, exhibitions shifted in content away from portraying the particularity of Arab art and displaying familiar streets and memories of home. While some of these changes may have been unconscious, and perhaps influenced by the duration of artists’ residence in Austria, other changes were based on decisions taken by the Collective regarding which topics to avoid and which to focus on in order to achieve greater resonance within the Austrian art scene. Hence, in public appearances, event announcements, presentations, poem readings, and art exhibitions alike, there was always an imagined Austrian public that the Collective was speaking to. As Farid, one of the artists, explained:

I personally don’t want to be seen as Farid, the Oriental painter, the poor refugee. For me, it is important to be seen as who I am. If I am Farid or Fred, it is the same. This is what the Austrians need to understand. As long as I cannot be Fred just as much as Farid, we will never be the same. (Group discussion, 3 May 2020)

Yet, his colleague Samira, also a member of the Collective, immediately added:

This is why we do it: we would not need such a prominent public venue. We want to change the image that Farid is different from Fred or that Samira cannot be Sabrina. We dream of being a place for arts and culture, where everyone can attend and see the great artists that came from Syria and not just the poor refugees. We are so much more. (Group discussion, 3 May 2020)

For both Samira and Farid, the potential for a time when their refugee background would no longer determine their status in society motivated their engagement with the Austrian public. These possible futures or “maybes” can have a very strong motivational character in shifting people’s self-understanding and therefore their behaviour. Long and Moore underline the importance of this potentiality in the analysis of sociality, arguing for the relevance of considering “both a

capacity to fantasise about forms of sociality that don’t exist and an ability to remake the forms of sociality that they already have” (2013: 1) in analysis. This capacity to fantasise can be just as much of a driving force as experienced sociality (2013: 1ff). For Long and Moore, the motivation to change forms of social relations, as much as fantasising about the possibilities of doing so, returns the “human subject” as the focus of discussions on relational theories. Accordingly, a focus on power asymmetries and historical relations make this applicable to analysing encounters. An orientation towards desires, motivations, and ethical imaginings is necessary to re-humanise concepts that focus on broader relations and their embeddedness in human contacts.

As already discussed, an encounter and the interactions it involves begins well before a physical meeting, as each person involved produces or imagines knowledge of the other. While Farid and Samira dreamed about the role of the Collective, they very much considered the societal, historical, and political context in which they were embedded. They aspired to change it by envisioning how they wanted to be perceived, part of which involved deemphasising cultural differences. This was a matter of resisting the image of Arabs produced in Austrian media, an imagined knowledge grounded in stereotypes and expectations, about a group that was supposedly “different” from the self-perception of the general Austrian public.

Encounters create affective space

To resist their own othering, the Collective envisioned an “imagined other” in the form of Austrian public with whom they wanted to engage. This imagined other was fuelled by shared ideas about what would appeal to Austrians. In the preparatory meeting for their International Women’s Day event, the question of who would be the event’s moderator was a point of intense discussion within the Collective. The Collective’s founder suggested that a woman should moderate instead of him, in order to portray the progressiveness of the Collective. Samira immediately agreed, adding that “it should be someone who can also speak German to not fully depend on a translator. It does not look good, if the moderator cannot even welcome the Austrians properly” (Fieldnotes, 29 February 2020). While Samira’s suggestion was acknowledged, the discussion continued as to who would be “representable” enough. Inas suggested a young woman who had been living in Austria for a decade at that point, and had a very high command of German. Yet, Samira and Farid immediately vetoed the suggestion because she wore a headscarf, which they saw as a ‘wrong’ symbol of their position in society. “They will immediately put us into the Islamic sector”, Farid explained. While the planning team continued to discuss options, it became clear that they neither wanted to choose a speaker who would in any way portray patriarchy or religiosity, nor someone lacking German skills; the ideal moderator

was someone who would be dressed like and spoke the same as their imagined Austrian audience. The dilemma was eventually solved by making the young, veiled woman present in a *Dirndl*, the traditional Austrian costume, while the rest of the Collective would dress in different local costumes so as not to embarrass her as the only costume wearer. This choice was intended to change their position and way of being perceived in Austrian society. Imagining how their encounter with the Austrian public should look in order to achieve the desired effect, it directly influenced how they portray themselves, as notable in the planning team's discussions. By extension, it also influenced how they engaged with each other, determining who among them was presentable enough according to their idea about desirable visibility as they attempted to engage with the wider public.

The potential for transformations within encounters

There is a hope bestowed on the transformative potential of encounters that is also a driving force in the activities of the Collective. While previous events had often taken place in migrant clubs or community centres run by charity organisations, with the International Women's Day event, the winery was consciously selected as a new location for intellectual exchange and production, because it had a reputation for hosting influential exhibitions and as a location associated with liberal and progressive thought. In addition, being in a winery was seen as a way to counteract stereotypes about strictly religious Muslim Arabs. This last point was especially important to 25-year-old Inas, who explained:

When I was still in Syria, I often had religious elements in my paintings, now I would rather paint landscapes, urban scenes from my memory. I think the Austrians would relate to this more. [...] To some extent, I am painting for them, so they would better understand me and who I really am. I think none of us is still painting like before. It would not be good to make religion the focus point of the paintings in the Austrian context. We had discussed this. (Interview, 17 April 2020)

As this reflection illustrates, the Collective did not produce art for art's sake, but rather to communicate with an imagined Austrian public and thereby transform the image of Arabs in Austria. Their weekly meetings rarely revolved around art-related topics, but instead were concerned with daily life, including grievances, experiences with bureaucrats, and the possible roles of Arab intellectuals in the Austrian cultural landscape. The community could not be described as a community bound by faith, ethnicity, or even language; it was built around a shared destiny in Austrian exile. The connecting factor was therefore a common vision

of changing negative stereotypes about Arabs in Austria. The Collective saw the power asymmetry inscribed in their day-to-day interactions and therefore aimed to create new forms of engagement through art. While changing power asymmetries and social status was understood as a longer-term project, none saw it as unchangeable. The potential of the encounter between the Collective and the Austrian public was bestowed with hopes and "maybes" connected to a possible future outcome. The work involved in preparing for this possible future transformed the Collective itself through the ways in which topics and event locations were chosen, as well as which topics, themes, and places were dismissed as unsuitable to this imagined future.

Here, Fountain's (2016) research on post-tsunami relief work in Aceh, Indonesia is informative. In arguing for the transformative potential of encounters, he cautions against understanding different groups as closed entities, using the example of disaster relief as an encounter (2016: 164). In his analysis of the complex interfaith interactions between Christian Mennonite volunteers and Muslim Acehese NGO workers, Fountain discusses how the perception and interaction of volunteers with their Acehese co-workers and hosts developed by "including the possibility of unanticipated transformations in opinions, identities, and dispositions" (2016: 180).

Fountain's conclusions are applicable to understanding the Collective, as their encounter with the Austrian public was also being shaped by the meeting of religions, embodied practices, and organisations, to create further unresolvable tensions (2016: 179). For those involved in the encounter-as-event and the encounter-as-process, "ideals of engagement, and conceptions of the other, shift from the abstract/ideational into a concrete and specific form. The trajectory of this change is never entirely predictable, nor is it easily guided" (2016:178). Those involved in the encounter are

susceptible to (unpredictable) affective transformation, but those removed from the immediate context are not. This creates the possibility of a fissure, separating the field of encounters from wider networks that nevertheless remain implicated in the ways encounters play out. (2016: 179)

Accordingly, encounters are not just built on power asymmetries but have the inherent power to change them for those directly involved. Active engagement with the assumed or imagined "other" might bring to light false assumptions and unholdable ascriptions. On the other hand, these interactions might also intensify, reaffirm, or transform the existing production of knowledge about the other and in turn shift the locations of difference and sameness as perceived between groups. With these changing ideas about the "other", power asymmetries may also be brought into question or reaffirmed. As such, this can bring positive change by

reducing stereotyping as much as it also has the potential to create or reinforce negative attitudes (2016: 176).

Effects on self-understandings, social configurations, and subjectivities

Unfortunately, none of the hoped for Austrians came to the Collective's International Women's Day event. In discussing how to proceed after the event, the founder of the Collective reflected that "[w]e had really nice discussions and the poems were beautiful", while also being concerned that "I don't want this to be forgotten" (Fieldnotes, Meeting, 13 March 2020). While there was disappointment over the event, and how it failed to impact their position in society as hoped because it did not reach their target audience, there was also an acknowledgement that new ideas of engagement needed to be found. "I would love to watch how we did and how we looked like. It is such a shame that *they* have not seen it", Samira sighed (Fieldnotes, meeting, 13 March 2020). Fortunately, some members had videotaped the event on their mobile phones, and it was decided to upload the event on social media so that people could rewatch it. "This way, we can also see in the comments, what they think about it. An Arab in a *Dirndl* should be enough reason to watch", she jokingly added.

There was a deep curiosity within the Collective about how they would be seen by the public. Seen as a representative of Austria due to my position as researcher, after some time I was asked to present my own impression of Arabs to the Collective. While I was deeply uncomfortable with this request, the urge for understanding how they were perceived through the eye of the other, in this case myself, was important to them. To know how they were imagined by others helped the Collective to better strategise about future events. In their request, the Collective was searching to better understand the status quo as they reorganised themselves and their activities to better fulfil their aims. The way the Collective envisioned their encounter with an imagined Austrian public would continue to influence their self-understanding, how they operated, and the knowledge production about themselves that they hoped to encourage among their Austrian target audience. Reactions to an envisioned encounter affected subjectivities, reshaping self-understandings and social configurations in the process.

As the formation and planning of a single event demonstrates, a permanent reshaping of the self can happen by attempting to be seen through the eye of an imagined other. In the case of the Collective, this took the shape of questions like: How should we look for this encounter? Where could it lead us to? To stand one's ground might result in a tendency to emphasise difference and hence processes of othering. Conversely, an intention to even out power asymmetries might result in underlining sameness and hence processes of "saming".

Consequently, I argue that by imagining themselves through the eyes of the other, the Collective reinforces that the self and the other, while inherently ontologically connected, are not the same. In doing so, the Collective thus came to reaffirm power disparities. By imagining how they might be perceived by Austrians and therefore creating an "other" against which to reimagine themselves, they created preconceived ideas about who or what the "other" is, and the similarities and differences that defined each. Hence, the encounter itself created locations of difference and sameness through the processes of selfing and othering. Paradoxically, the dichotomies that evolved through an encounter intended to bridge power asymmetries reinstated them instead and gave them renewed power.

The Austrian public is imagined through daily interactions with bureaucrats, neighbours, passers-by, and news media – as well as ideas, expectations, fears, and desires – which created the mirror through which the Collective sees itself. These reflections might seem very unsteady since the surface on which that self-image is reflected is itself imagined and in the process of permanent reshaping. Since the encounter between the Austrian public and the Viennese Arab Artist Collective holds an inherent potentiality to develop into another or alternative direction that would affect subjectivities and socialities, "a multifaceted and affective point of contact with worlds of inequality, hovering on the verge of exhaustion while also harbouring the potential for things to be otherwise" (Biehl & Locke 2017:3). It is always unfinished and hence always in a "process of becoming".

Conclusion

Coming back to the initial question of how the imagining of desired encounters shapes subjectivities despite not (yet) being materialised, this case illustrates the relation between desired (not-materialised) encounters and their potential to shape subjectivities. Before an encounter can be understood as such, a "difference" or "non-sameness" has to be established, since it is not naturally given. The production of social knowledge that would establish groups, ideas, or values as "different" is often based on assumptions and stereotypes which are being constantly re-formulated without requiring physical meetings to occur. Yet, the knowledge produced is not neutral; images about the other, actual meetings, and possible outcomes are bestowed with expectations and emotions, creating an affective space existing separate of actual person-to-person encounters. Affective space is nourished by the power of strong emotions like fear or desire, which stir reactions, including changes in self-understandings, social configuration, and subjectivities. Hence, even if an encounter has not materialised – remaining in the realm of imagination – it can nonetheless develop a transformative potential.

Illustrating these points through the experience of the Collective, it becomes clear how the artists created knowledge about the desired counterpart that they wanted to engage – the topics and themes that could interest or alienate them, the places that would interest them, and even the dress and comportment that would change their image of Arab refugees. By creating the image of the Austrian other, they were also creating knowledge about themselves. This social knowledge was never neutral, but mirrored the fears, desires, and affective investments of the Collective. The fear to solidify existing stereotypes by choosing the wrong presenters, topics, or locations played a major role in the social configuration and self-censorship of the Collective. In turn, the desire to prove common stereotypes wrong and create new connotations that would alter their positionality in society was a strong motivating force influencing their activities and reflections. The Collective's International Women's Day event, itself the culmination of multiple trajectories informed by prior discussions and planning, reflected experiences and emotions that created a particular affective space in relation to the social and political context of Austria and the power relations in which this positioned the Collective. Research on the encounter must bring the human subject, and their motivations, desires, and fears to the fore without neglecting the power asymmetries in which they are situated. The COVID-context and its scattering effect on the efforts by the Collective show "the fragility of wished-for sociality, and its dependence on both the recognition of others and the macrological structures of political economy" (Long & Moore 2013:12). An encounter perspective must hence always include a focus on plasticity, becoming and potentiality and is inherently unfinished.

An encounter perspective on social relations and collective identity brings knowledge production, power asymmetries, imaginaries, and affective spaces together to better understand experiences of inclusion and exclusion, and how these might be changed. Combining macro and meso-level analysis of inequalities and power asymmetries with the micro-level considerations of affect, emotions, motivations, and desires, it contributes to understanding group formation and transformation as they are shaped and reshaped through real, imagined, and potential encounters.

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