

TRANSCULTURAL URBAN RE-IMAGININGS: EPHEMERAL AND  
PARTICIPATORY ART INTERVENTIONS IN THE MACROLOTTO ZERO  
NEIGHBORHOOD

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KEYWORDS

Public art, Prato (Italy), Chinatown, transcultural place-making, urban multiculturalism, urban culture(s)

PUBLICATION DATE

Issue 10, December 18, 2020

HOW TO CITE

Matteo Dutto and Andrea Del Bono. “Transcultural Urban Re-Imaginings: Ephemeral and Participatory Art Interventions in the Macrolotto Zero Neighborhood” *On\_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 10 (2020). <<http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2020/15786/>>.

Permalink URL: <<http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2020/15786/>>

URN: <urn:nbn:de:hebis:26-opus-157863>



# Transcultural Urban Re-Imagings: Ephemeral and Participatory Art Interventions in the Macrolotto Zero Neighborhood

## Abstract

The city of Prato is arguably one of the most widely studied multicultural urban contexts in Italy and more generally in Europe. Yet, in the analysis of the dynamics that enable this conceptualization of the city as a space of cultural complexity little attention has been paid to the way in which localized processes of transculturation have, since the early 1980s, changed both the visual landscape of Prato, and the way in which it is imagined and understood by the different people that call it home. This paper focuses on Macrolotto Zero, one of the city's most multicultural neighborhoods particularly marked by decades of Chinese diasporic movements. It explores how processes of exchange/conflict between local and migrant residents, artistic collectives, activists and policy-makers have profoundly changed the way in which the neighborhood is imagined and conceptualized at a local, national and transnational level. Drawing from fieldwork, interviews with local artists and historical research on the neighborhood's visual and aural changes, this paper argues that this historical industrial area of Prato has been undergoing an extensive process of re-imagining. This process has been driven by bottom-up participatory art interventions and by residents which have repositioned the neighborhood as a creative and innovative space of experimentation that testifies to intricate cross-cultural entanglements.

Prato, Sunday, 2 February 2020: amid growing concerns for the spread of the Coronavirus, both researchers stood among a crowd of art enthusiasts, locals, and passers-by in the city of Prato's Macrolotto Zero neighborhood — more commonly referred to as 'Chinatown' in "one of the most extraordinary places in terms of Chinese migration in contemporary Europe."<sup>1</sup> Here, the locally-based art collective Dryphoto had organized the meeting point for a public art initiative led by Chinese-born artist Ai Teng as the only surviving event of the city's 2020 Chinese New Year celebration palimpsest. The initiative consisted of helping the artist to pin to the walls of Via Pistoiese, the social and cultural center of the neighborhood, 716 nianhua artworks — A4 format prints on recycled paper symbolizing solidarity and hope, while news coming from Wuhan were starting to awaken the world's senses to an upcoming global public health emergency. The art intervention was thought of as an ephemeral one, as the prints would have been pinned only temporarily, inviting the people to take them home as a gift before the forecasted storm of the afternoon would wash them away. Teng is no newcomer to Prato; a few months before the performance, she had won an award for a photographic

documentation of the neighborhood based on her 2019 research on the social and cultural dynamics of the Chinese migrant settlement in the city, which she presented at the Centro Pecci<sup>2</sup> in front of a large crowd of art enthusiasts.



Fig. 1: Ai Teng (left) and Vittoria Ciolini from the Dryphoto collective (right) during the Nianhua prints art intervention.<sup>3</sup>

Prato is a multifaceted city that has been shaped by a long history of national and transnational migration flows. It is home to over 120 different nationalities and sits at the heart of one of Europe's largest territorial concentrations of Chinese migration if one considers together the areas of its administrative borders, that of neighboring Florence and the smaller councils in between.<sup>4</sup> One of the most widely studied cases of multicultural cities in Italy, Prato can perhaps be best understood as a complex and productive space of encounters and reciprocal exchanges between multiple cultures and languages. It is a space where we can witness first-hand how migration has the potential to generate what Ilaria Vanni calls a “transcultural edge” — new and innovative spaces “where unevenly distributed different cultural systems, representation, imaginaries converge and give rise to new transcultural practices.”<sup>5</sup> However, little of the scholarship on the city of Prato has engaged with the plurality of ethnicities and cultures that have settled in the city since the early 1980s, or with the interactions between them, concentrating instead on the dichotomous relationship between ‘local’ residents and a putative, homogenous ‘Chinese community.’<sup>6</sup> To this we would add that the public

conceptualization of the city as a space marked mostly by industrial and business practices has ended up creating a shared imaginary, yet little attention has been paid to the way in which creative processes of transculturation and change have been fostered by local art interventions in certain parts of the city. This is perhaps the most evident in Macrolotto Zero.

To address this issue, in this article we look at the interactions between Dryphoto, the Macrolotto Zero neighborhood, and Ai Teng's two art interventions as ephemeral place-making practices and cross-cultural experiences of communication, including new concepts and vocabularies "allowing for transversal, and hence radically inclusive, ways of thinking and acting."<sup>7</sup> We argue that these participatory art interventions turn this industrial area in the immediate outskirts of the city into a canvas for experimentation that makes blurred, multiple, and complex cultural boundaries both its aesthetic and conceptual core. In doing so, they foster new processes of transcultural communication that question dominant ethnocentric and isolationist narratives and re-imagine the neighborhood as a productive translocal network of belonging. Our analysis draws from an extended ethnographic engagement conducted in the neighborhood between January 2018 and December 2019, when participant and non-participant observation and historical research on the neighborhood's visual and aural changes were carried out. We complemented this phase with direct participation to two public events in November 2019 and February 2020, which were then followed by semi-structured interviews with Dryphoto's director Vittoria Ciolini and Ai Teng.

Our article begins with a historical overview of the socio-economic dynamics of Prato and then zooms into the Macrolotto Zero to understand how it has become a connection point between Chinese migration and local art organizations. From here, we analyze the history of one art collective in particular and its role in setting in motion a process of meaning-making for the neighborhood by means of public art. This will lead us to the central part of the article, which is dedicated to the analysis of Teng's art initiatives. The cultural reading of them will help us put flesh to the argument that art practices as such bring to the surface useful vocabularies apt to describe instances of urban cross-culturation that are otherwise suppressed in most of the accounts of Prato and that are much needed in this localized analysis of contemporary urban multiculturalism.

## 1\_The City, the Neighborhood

Prato has established its industrial reputation exporting textiles and yarns. The flourishing of family-led textile firms in the city created a production boom in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which resulted in the arrival of a high number of laborers, firstly from the surrounding Tuscan countryside and, later on, from the southern regions of Italy.<sup>8</sup> Popularized over the years as the ‘City of Rags’ and the ‘Manchester of Italy’, Prato is often evoked in relation to its industrial urban culture; however, it is for its multicultural character that it has hit the newspapers’ headlines in recent times.<sup>9</sup> As of March 2020, out of a local population of 194,266 individuals, foreign citizens represent almost 21%.<sup>10</sup> Among those who were born abroad, Chinese residents are the striking majority, amounting to 57% of the total. Although the records of the City of Prato report that the resident Chinese population reaches 23,213, a recent European Union report refers to estimates “which put the actual Chinese population (...) at between 30,000 and 40,000,”<sup>11</sup> about twice the official figure. With these numbers at hand, it is easy to understand how Prato has become an interesting case study due to its “relatively small size and comparatively large proportion and diversity of immigrants,”<sup>12</sup> but also for the way in which the presence of a considerable number of Chinese migrants “has profoundly redrawn the profile of the city in just a few years’ time.”<sup>13</sup>

Located in the immediate vicinity of the western end of one of Prato's old city gateways, surrounded by railroad tracks and other physical barriers, and characterized by a disorienting geography of narrow one-way streets, dead-end alleyways, and a seamless mix of industrial and residential areas, Macrolotto Zero has always represented the living embodiment of a *città fabbrica*, a city-factory.<sup>14</sup> It hosts some of the most important industries and serves as one of the most effective examples of what the urbanist Bernardo Secchi understood as *mixité*, namely the “vibrant mixing of different social and cultural elements”<sup>15</sup> reflected in the urban fabric. As Krause and Bressan outline, the distinctive layout of the neighborhood emerged as a quick and largely unregulated response to the critical housing and working needs of the post-WWII years, when migrants from villages and cities around Prato and from southern Italy moved here to work in the textile industry.<sup>16</sup> The neighborhood’s role became even more prominent with the arrival of successive waves of Chinese migrants since the mid-1990s; these migrants, who came from the surroundings of municipal Wenzhou, in China’s south-

eastern province of Zhejiang, established their business operations in Macrolotto Zero taking advantage of its proximity to the city center and the presence of large scale warehouses, which Italian owners were progressively leaving behind as a result of a slow phase of economic decline. After decades of migratory movements and the consolidation of a conspicuous number of economic activities, the Chinese transnational culture in Prato is obviously not only a cog in the city's productive machine, but a pivotal component of the city's cultural make-over. The migrant Chinese population is spread across the city, and its traces are particularly visible in the Macrolotto Zero's central spine, Via Pistoiese. Today the street is a bustling area of warehouses and commercial activities characterized by "highly visible Chinese cultural markers including Chinese shops, signs, (and) decorations on residences."<sup>17</sup> Due to its "symbolic character,"<sup>18</sup> the street and its surrounding area have acquired the status of "point of reference"<sup>19</sup> for all the Chinese who live in the city, as well as for all the people who gravitate in the entire regional territory.

Macrolotto Zero is in many ways emblematic of the inextricable ties between industry and migration that have shaped the imaginings of Prato through critical discourse, policies, and media representations. The impact of Chinese migration on the city's social and economic landscape has proven to be the most popular field of inquiry, with most studies of the past thirty years focusing on the contribution of Chinese entrepreneurial culture to the local, national and global economy, as well as on its ability to move from an initial subordinate position within the garment industry to a leading one in the fast-fashion sector.<sup>20</sup> The key role played by national and local migration policies in enabling and fostering narratives of exclusion that limit transcultural engagement across communities has been another key point addressed in a number of key studies on the city of Prato. Looking at the public and media discourses that characterized the local elections of 2009, for instance, Bracci argues that the xenophobic rhetoric deployed by the right-wing candidate succeeded in turning the Chinese into the "perfect enemy", eventually leading to the victory of the first right-wing mayor in the history of the city.<sup>21</sup> The politics of containment and segregation enacted by the City Council between 2009 and 2014 reinforced narratives of exclusion and racism that persist to this day. With few exceptions, the national and local media that lamented the lack of integration of the 'Chinese community' rarely featured the voices and the faces of local Chinese association leaders, business owners and residents, thus further popularizing

segregation narratives.<sup>22</sup> As for the larger framework adopted to study migration in Prato, scholarly research on the role played by young migrants and second generations has, again, focused largely on Chinese diasporic identity.<sup>23</sup> These studies have provided a vast collection of important information. However, understanding and engaging with the superdiversity and complexity of Prato requires not only the adoption of transnational and transcultural frameworks, but also the implementation of collaborative and multidisciplinary approaches that move beyond binary and essentialized understandings of ethnicity to acknowledge and engage with the vast network of exchanges and reciprocal influences that different social actors have woven across the city over the years.<sup>24</sup> It is in this context that studies of participatory art-interventions can offer a privileged lens to generate a more nuanced and complex understanding of how processes of transculturation shape alternative imaginaries of Prato. As we will discuss in the following sections, they do so by using the neighborhood as a canvas on which depth is added to bidimensional representations of ethnic identity, their relation to the territory and to a multiplicity of city cultures.

## **2\_A Transcultural Urban Culture**

The forms of identification shaped by global cultural flows, the way(s) they overlap with spatial formations, and the way in which the representation of cosmopolitan futures can be reflected in the urban landscape are the main issues lying at the core of the collaboration that resulted in this article. The city, in this context, emerges as the common denominator, an “interesting visual laboratory”<sup>25</sup> and a milieu whose “quintessential characteristic”<sup>26</sup> is living-with-difference. Ours is an attempt to shed light on intangible yet ever-present forms of “throwntogetherness” described by Doreen Massey in her analysis of the co-constitutive nature of space and multiplicity.<sup>27</sup> Focusing on the city means gaining a privileged standpoint from which to observe the overlay of cultural-economic impulses as well as of imaginings of “difference, otherness, fragmentation, splintering, multiplicity, heterogeneity, diversity, [and] plurality.”<sup>28</sup> Our analysis of transcultural imaginaries starts from here, and it is premised on the acknowledgement of complexity, both at a cultural and at a spatial level.

As Smith writes, “contemporary transnational migration vastly complicates the ethnographic inscription of ‘migration narratives’, and forces us to pay attention to the

intra-ethnic dimension of urban ethnic politics throughout the world.”<sup>29</sup> With this understanding in mind, follows a critique of definitions strictly based on sedentary imaginaries of culture as a matter of “rootedness”<sup>30</sup> and a necessary analysis of a culturally complex urban culture, whereby “established notions of both national and ethnic identity are increasingly untenable, and put under pressure by the transformative and disorienting forces of rapid change at global, national and local levels.”<sup>31</sup> This also implies the application of a specific perspective to the description of the bonds between culture and locality, one that contributes to a multifaceted perception of their intricate relationship. In what we call ‘transcultural re-imaginings’, we see precisely the kind of rendering of a dynamic, plural and hybrid identity lived in today’s Macrolotto Zero. That is a “transculturalised urban culture”<sup>32</sup> understood as a visible orientation of space to various publics and cultural hybridities that can destabilize the dominant conceptualization of the neighborhood as “Italy’s Little China”<sup>33</sup> and “the city within the city.”<sup>34</sup>

Inspired by Glick Schiller and Caglar’s analysis of places as interconnected nodes “constituted by multiscalar networks of differential power,”<sup>35</sup> we also resort to a geographical orientation that allows us to steer clear from the interpretation of the city (or the neighborhood, in this particular case) as a unit of analysis. We subscribe, in other terms, to an analytical perspective that seeks to challenge stabilized ideas of bounded space, especially when these overlap with essentialized conceptualizations of ethnic culture and are consolidated by the rhetoric of the immigrant enclave. To highlight urban space’s function as a vehicle of cultural change, Hou proposes to use a “transcultural place-making framework”, that “addresses transcultural processes and understandings (...) [and that] highlights the instrumentality of place-making as a vehicle for cross-cultural learning, individual agency, and collective actions.”<sup>36</sup> Public art facilitates our dialogue with this transcultural place-making agenda, as its generative potential in this area of Prato exemplifies how we can think of it as a “portal through which (...) complex (...) relations of cultural exchange are being crafted.”<sup>37</sup> By focusing on public art interventions, we want to put the stress on the re-imaginings that result from it. In doing so, we understand urban space beyond spatial constraints, framing it instead as a concatenation of “claim-making practices, situations, sites, institutions, and social relations in which migrant[s] and non-migrant[s], build [trans-cultural] sociabilities.”<sup>38</sup>



We use the term ‘public art’ throughout this paper not in its general connotation, but to refer specifically to ephemeral creative works and practices that are devised to be experienced freely in public spaces.<sup>39</sup> Ranging from community-driven interventions to public monuments, from site-specific performances to digital mediated practices, public art can take a multitude of different forms and can serve functions that are not mutually exclusive, but rather co-exist in complex layers of meaning that often involve a process of exchange and negotiation between different stakeholders.<sup>40</sup> The creative interventions with which we engage in this paper can perhaps be best characterised as what Zebracki defines as acts of ‘public activism’: a form of art practice in publicly accessible sites, which “address/redress social marginalization through galvanizing critical thought and promoting inclusive change.”<sup>41</sup> An antagonistic drive to destabilize everyday urban interactions and dominant uses of public space sits at the heart of participatory activist practices that challenge the legitimacy of social injustice, of exclusionary narratives as well as the authority of the artist itself.<sup>42</sup> Adopting this lens allows us to critically engage with community-based art interventions that set out to challenge dominant imaginaries of Macrolotto Zero through a layered process of negotiation and encounter between artists, communities, the public, and place. As we will discuss in the next section, place is not merely a backdrop for the public art interventions of Dryphoto and Teng, but rather an active component of the practice itself. We will show that it is precisely via the activation of such practices that the cultural and spatial complexity of the neighborhood emerges, thus challenging its homogenizing narrative as the urban container of an ‘ethnically other’ community.

### **3\_Macrolotto Zero and Public Art**

In recent years, Macrolotto Zero has become the background of many public art initiatives, which have significantly contributed to enriching the debate about the neighborhood and its future. In 2014, the Italian and Chinese place-name *Piazza dell’Immaginario* / 虚幻广场 (Imagination Square) was coined as the first of a series of interventions that have been located in a mixed-use rectangle between Via Pistoiese and the parallel street, Via Filzi. *Piazza dell’Immaginario* started as an art initiative led by the art collective Dryphoto and found support in Luca Zhou Long, leader of the Chinese community organization Ram Union Italia, who was interested in the beautification of Via Pistoiese and its surroundings. The project soon undertook a political dimension as

it was meant to function as a synergetic force between various stakeholders, all of which were ultimately moved by the belief that the neighborhood needed more public spaces for social relations. The City of Prato, the Tuscany Region and a local museum of contemporary art all decided to take part in it.

The majority of the artworks that were installed in this portion of the neighborhood (insists on) creating significant meanings by underlining the dynamics of cross-pollination between different cultural impulses. A site-specific artwork, for instance, has been disguised in the urban landscape of Via Filzi by means of a poetic comment on how migratory flows resemble wind currents that mingle with new winds. The artwork is simply represented by the printed motto *Come il Vento* (Like the Wind) on a dismissed factory front, which is translated in Chinese 如风一般 on the other side of the building. To the unaware passer-by, the two awnings are camouflaged within the linguistic streetscape made of street signs and shop names; however, as soon as they are interpreted as a part of *Piazza dell'Immaginario* they become ways to redirect the attention to Macrolotto Zero as a cultural terrain in which a series of transplanted individuals and families resemble wind currents, moving cultures and identities from one place to the other and crisscrossing their always-changing pathways.

The most iconic work included in the *Piazza dell'Immaginario* project is located nearby: this consists of three large-scale vertical pictures that are part of a larger project led by one of Dryphoto's founders and titled 'The Might of Nature.' Two of the three photos are close-up shots of tree branches, grown out of a terrain in rural Tuscany that was destroyed by a major earthquake in 1919. According to the project's curators, the artist wants to shed light on the fact that, "the same nature that once devastated all (...) has now brought forth vegetation once again."<sup>43</sup> *Piazza dell'Immaginario* here has brought to the neighborhood a strong message related to conflict and trauma, which recalls the way in which migration to Prato has often been presented in media outlets and the public debate. The message related to the mix of cultural elements in the neighborhood launched by the artwork and the floral metaphor, in this context, can be interpreted as much in terms of a distressful clash as in terms of potential for different forms of culture to bloom in all their beauty. The iconicity of this artwork, however, is in the coat of bright red paint that has re-purposed the wall from an impromptu notice board for Chinese advertising graffiti and paste-ups (as the wall used to be prior to the art installation) to a bright background for the tree large-scale prints. Discussed by Latham

in his exploration of Macrolotto Zero, this messy “semiotic appropriation of public space” was taken as a focal point for the propagation, by public opinions, of derogatory meanings connected to the neighborhood as an unruly space. It became “a marker of the lack of integration in the city and of the division between Italian and Chinese communities.”<sup>44</sup> Art here has significantly changed the meaning of this part of the city and, from a spatial perspective, it has contributed to the conceptualization of this portion of the neighborhood as ‘the heart’ of Macrolotto Zero; it has done so by spontaneously reshaping the function of this urban space into a successful public area, which is now used by locals (mostly Chinese residents) as a gathering spot. As a testimony to the relevance of this place, it was exactly from the public seating located under the red wall that Teng’s art performance started.



Fig. 2: Participants collect the nianhua prints and prepare for their distribution in *Piazza dell’Immaginario*.

The creative impetus provided to the neighborhood by means of public art initiatives has intensified in the last few years. In 2016, a new public space was established for the second anniversary of the construction of *Piazza dell’Immaginario*. The new square, called *Piazza 5 Marzo* (March 5<sup>th</sup> Square) was opened in the southern end of the neighborhood, where a run-down parking lot owned by a local supermarket had remained unused for many years. For the occasion, the team of *Piazza dell’Immaginario*

reached an agreement with the owner of the square for a temporary lease. Then it partnered up with the Macrolotto Zero-based architect studio Ecòl,<sup>45</sup> which cleaned up the space and designed a new paving conceptualized as a mosaic; this was carried out employing exclusively the same paints and templates used for the marking of roads and the materials for ordinary road maintenance. The second phase consisted of the installation, still created by the architect studio, of urban furniture made by recycled materials. Benches, for instance, were assembled from with cypress trunks fallen during an exceptionally harsh storm, which occurred in March of the previous year (hence the toponym *Piazza 5 Marzo*). The result was an astonishing intervention of public design, which received the favor of administration and locals alike. In 2016 and 2017, the new square hosted a series of recreational activities as well as institutional events. Two, in particular, proved the success of this work: The Watermelon Festival (a street festival that enjoyed a huge turnout of Chinese and Italian residents) and an open cinema initiative called Cinema Chinatown, with a palimpsest that included Italian movies with Chinese subtitles and Chinese movies with Italian subtitles to allow for a bilingual attendance in the new public area.

#### **4\_Dryphoto and Ai Teng: Constructing Transcultural Imaginings through Art**

For many, the streets of Macrolotto Zero might still suggest little more than a messy conglomerate of Asian shops in the immediate outskirts of an old Italian town dotted with chimneys and factories. Yet, as we showed in the previous section, art has had a significant role in advancing its perception, from a neighborhood inhabited by a diasporic Chinese population, to a space projected in a cosmopolitan urban future and defined by social and cultural tensions. The history of the art collective Dryphoto and this process of new meaning-making for Macrolotto Zero are intimately connected. The group was formed at the end of the 1970s as a collective of young artists fascinated with everyday landscape photography. In particular, the personal trajectory of one of its founding members, Andrea Abati, has had an enormous relevance in the development of Dryphoto's engagement with Macrolotto Zero. Abati distanced himself from the art collective initial mission in order to counter the progressive process of city center depopulation, which led to the establishment of the group's studio in the old town of Prato. He moved his operations to Macrolotto Zero at the beginning of 2000s, at a time

when Chinese migration to Prato was starting to emerge as a socio-cultural phenomenon in its own right. The most important event that sealed the connection between Dryphoto and the local Chinese population happened in 2008, when the center-left coalition of the city cancelled the traditional dragon parade throughout the neighborhood during the celebrations of the Chinese New Year. The administration declared that the cultural celebration of the Chinese festivity should be spatially confined within the amphitheater of the Prato landmark modern art museum Centro Pecci. Together with a group of artists named *Senza Fissa Dimora* ('No Fixed Abode'), Abati orchestrated a series of performances to protest against the decision of the administration. By himself he printed a series of greeting cards from the previous Chinese New Year celebrations and distributed them throughout all the shops around Via Pistoiese, while another member re-enacted the dragon parade by covering its trajectory backwards, stopping the traffic along the way and explaining to drivers the reason of his intervention. The following year, members of the Buddhist association in Prato contacted Dryphoto and asked the collective to help with the organization of that year's New Year festivities. Reflecting on this instance in an interview with the researchers, Dryphoto's director said:

"This is where our relationship with Chinese migration started, to support the Chinese New Year. Initially, nobody knew about it; it was all limited to the [Chinese] community. We called artists to work for the festival; we organized an exhibition at the museum of contemporary art and put together a series of initiatives to consolidate this tradition in the city." (Interview with Dryphoto's director Vittoria Ciolini, 14 May 2020)

The cross-cultural alliances between an Italian artist collective and the Prato-based Chinese associations invested in the celebrations of the Chinese New Year shed light on this festivity as a "disruptive situation", one that shows the potential of arts and culture to "call into question the daily practices of urban life in relation with immigration."<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, as a cultural terrain upon which new forms of collaborations arise, art's "mediating role" comes to the fore, bringing together "various publics and localities, including shifting constellations of new arrivals, native populations, and the state."<sup>47</sup> As we have shown, the partnership between Dryphoto and other institutions and cultural organizations has gone a long way; yet, as the next section will discuss, the Chinese New Year in particular has become a moment to reflect on the state of Chinese-

Italian forms and joint experiences. In this context, the recruitment of Ai Teng, a Chinese born artist living in Italy, has signified a step further in the elaboration of the trans-cultural imaginings that we are elaborating here. In order to understand the relevance of Teng's profile, we need to rewind to 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2019, when she received an award for a photographic project that she completed as part of a call for street photographers named 'the China Road' to interpret the meaning of Via Pistoiese, the backbone of Macrolotto Zero. The title of the art competition was a pun on the idea of the Silk Road as a mythical communication link between the East and the West and the way in which the neighborhood is commonly referred to as Prato's Chinatown.<sup>48</sup>

Selected as one of the three finalist projects, Teng's work included a significant performative art dimension, which she combined with the aesthetic gaze of the photographer. The award ceremony speech was the artist's springboard for the collaboration with Dryphoto that followed. Upon the presentation of the three finalists' works, Teng described her artistic intervention as stemming 'almost naturally' from her experience as a Chinese expatriate living in Italy and approaching a Chinese diasporic settlement as both a familiar and strange space. As of 2020, Teng has spent seven years in Italy. She travelled from northern China to attend a language school in Tuscany, then enrolled in the Florence Art Academy, where she specialized in graphic design (in China, Teng's field of expertise was 'traditional Chinese mural painting'). She has since decided to settle down in Florence.

Before embarking on this project, Teng used to come to Prato from Florence to have breakfast or to buy groceries; in doing so she was experiencing "the nostalgia typical of who has left their home" (fieldwork diary, 23 November 2019). Teng described how her project started as a "simple glance upon Macrolotto Zero" (fieldwork diary, 23 November 2019), which initially looked to her as if she had travelled "back to 1980s China" (fieldwork diary, 23 November 2019).<sup>49</sup> Her project unfolds as a series of snapshots *of* her rather than *by* her; in other words, she is her own model in a journey that aims to highlight feelings of nostalgia and estrangement deriving from the shifting positionalities of simultaneously being an insider and outsider. As she explains: "A thing that I realized straight away is that taking photos of the people in Macrolotto Zero is almost impossible. They are afraid that you are either a journalist or someone else who wants to record them" (fieldwork diary, 23 November 2019). The artist's shifting positionality and the choice of depicting herself amid other Chinese represents an important

cultural reading of the area's past and present, in which the role of surveillance is acknowledged as part of the everyday experience of the inhabitants of the neighborhood. Here, the first imagining of the relation between culture and space is laid bare and it is translated into a conflictual relationship between the embodiment of Chineseness and the gaze that represents and polices it. The first cross-cultural experience is hence set in motion, in which this distance between the representer and the represented is bridged by the artist herself, who uses her own appearance to camouflage within the everyday dynamics of the neighborhood. This, however, does not happen as a smooth process but produces other forms of otherness, which in turn help to move the static imagining of Chinese culture significantly forward.

Teng's work documents her own holiday in the neighborhood (hence the title 'Pratesi holidays'). The series consists of: a photo of the Chinese-Italian supermarket; a photo of an Italian woman staring at her while she attempts to cross the road; one where she poses next to two human-sized terracotta warriors decorating the pagoda-shaped entrance to a newly opened Chinese restaurant; another of a journey in a shared-car-system organized by local Chinese residents and business owners to commute short distances and save on petrol; a picture of her smoking a cigarette with a restaurant owner sitting on an upturned milk crate; a photo of a young Italian coiffeur employed by a local Chinese hairdresser; a photo of herself negotiating the prices of local products with a vegetable hawker at the Sunday market. An interesting aspect of this last photograph in particular is that Teng's negotiation is mediated by a translator. Asked about the hardships experienced in carrying out her artistic research in Macrolotto Zero, Teng said:

"I haven't encountered any particularly difficult situation. Maybe the only aspect that bothered me a bit was communicating with some people of the neighborhood. Not because they didn't want to talk to me, it's just that we don't speak the same language. They speak Wenzhouese, while I speak Mandarin; they are two completely different linguistic systems. So, I didn't really get what they were saying. (...) There is a feeling that I was trying to understand as I was doing research but which I couldn't realize until now: I am Chinese, but I cannot easily access their world." (Interview with Ai Teng, 2 July 2020)

Teng chose to reinterpret the space of Via Pistoiese as a generational hybrid space, perceived beyond the confinement of its ethnicized meaning. Even if we cannot argue that her art expands the conceptualization of the street beyond a putative Chineseness, we can certainly maintain that she refers to it as a heterogeneous set of identification

practices. These range from faking the attitude of an employee of a mobile phone booth on a drowsy workday, to mimicking the pose of a Chinese girl in a qipao; from embodying the attitude of a traveller taking a photo in a thematized ethnic village while visiting a city overseas, to fetishizing the exotic nature of Chinese delicacies. Her work is significant in that it highlights the collaboration engendered by her privileged point of entry in the social and cultural dynamics of the neighborhood, while at the same time acknowledging with sarcasm and wit the miscommunications between co-nationals.

As the transformation of a certain established imagining of Chinese culture sits at the core of this article, it is important to underline the reaction of the attendees of the art prize awarding ceremony where Teng delivered this speech. In Prato, it is quite well known that the majority of the Chinese residents speak a dialect which is not easily comprehensible to other Mandarin speaking Chinese. Furthermore, the misunderstandings originating from the interaction between migrants, their accents, and dialects are somewhat persistent in the popular imagination because the same difficulties of communication between co-nationals were common during the internal migration from the south of Italy to the northern regions and to Tuscany since the 1950s. And yet, when Teng mentioned that she needed a translation service because the only sentence that she understood from the Wenzhounese-speaking woman was ‘You don’t understand’, the crowd (mostly composed of locals) laughed out loud, as they witnessed the splintering of their (Chinese) ethnic imagery. The relevance of Teng’s identity was echoed by Dryphoto’s director when the latter shared with the researchers her understanding of the relevance of Teng’s work in the context of Prato:

“It is important to show that there are Chinese in Prato that make art and that they are not all working in the warehouses. It was relevant to make it with such a performance because it signals that this is something you [local] can experience firsthand. Ai lives in Florence, she does not come from New York city, this is happening right here. So this is why I was happy to be able to develop an art project together. I, for example, have always struggled to understand whether there are Chinese artists in this area. And it can sound trivial, but I think that it is very important to communicate that Ai is a female artist.” (Interview with Dryphoto’s director Vittoria Ciolini, 14 May 2020)



## 5\_ The Nianhua Prints Intervention

Originally conceived by Teng and Dryphoto as a moment of leisure and part of the celebrations for the 2020 Chinese New Year, the nianhua prints intervention in Macrolotto Zero took on a deeper meaning as concerns for the global coronavirus health crisis spread across Italy and the rest of the world. After the Prato organizing committee's decision to cancel the traditional celebrations in solidarity with the population of Wuhan,<sup>50</sup> Teng's art intervention remained one of the few side-events to take place on 2 February 2020. The colored woodblock prints, traditionally displayed during the New Year celebration to wish for prosperity, health, and peace for the future, became powerful signifiers of solidarity towards the people of China, who were the first to face the health crisis at the time. Teng retrieved the 716 prints used for her intervention in Weifang — Shandong, the province where she grew up and where a famous laboratory had been printing them for hundreds of years (Interview with Ai Teng, 2 July 2020).

As people started assembling at the meeting point in *Piazza dell'Immaginario*, Teng explained how each print had to be attached only temporarily to the walls of the neighborhood, allowing passers-by to collect them freely and take them home. The nianhua prints were meant firstly as a gift to the people of Macrolotto Zero, and only secondarily as temporary markers of the New Year celebrations. To achieve this objective, Teng eschewed an organized distribution plan, inviting participants to explore and interact with the neighborhood and its residents on their own. This decision to surrender control of the action, encouraging a process of exchange and discovery, is rooted in Teng's own understanding of what doing public art means. As she explains:

“I think that the most important thing for public art interventions like this one is true collaboration. Behind each intervention there needs to be an idea. If you learn to cooperate in harmony you end up building something beautiful, like a perfect circle. If everyone works together there won't be any attention paid to the small imperfections. One will focus on the overall perfect circle that unites all parts. At the same time, public art means uniting the imaginaries of the audience so that an artwork can truly become alive and continue living through them.” (Interview with Ai Teng, 2 July 2020)

Teng's 'perfect circle' began to take form while prints and facemasks were still being distributed, as the first nianhua markers began appearing across *Piazza dell'Immaginario*. In one corner they integrated with the only remaining trace of the red caption that originally accompanied Dryphoto's 2015 intervention, taking their place alongside

advertisement barcodes and stickers with improvised massage parlour numbers and escorts' private contacts, which have been at the centre of public controversies since at least 2014 (Figure 3).



Fig. 3: Nianhua prints, stickers and a corner of the red caption that accompanied Dryphoto's 2015 art intervention.

It is through instances like this that we can better understand how public art interventions like those of Teng and Dryphoto operate through complex processes of historical layering, with different unregulated elements contributing to the creation of new understandings of existing spaces. As Kanellopolou argues, drawing from the work of Gupta and Ferguson<sup>51</sup>, ephemeral interventions direct our attention to the way in which places are shaped “through people’s successive encounters, the testimonies of their cultures, the weavings of their previous stories and future expectations.”<sup>52</sup> The historical network of interconnections among these different moments and between the cultures and languages that traverse and mix in Macrolotto Zero was made even more visible as participants scattered across the streets of the neighborhood. Prints appeared next to graffiti in Italian with the lyrics of a traditional anarchist song (Figure 4), alongside street tags, overlaid on bilingual advertisement posters, attached to street signs and to the multilingual cautionary signs put up by the City Council (Figure 5). In all instances, they were posted by participants according to their own criteria, agenda, and aesthetics,

producing a multitude of temporary reconfigurations of space that reflected their personal imaginary of the space they were operating in.

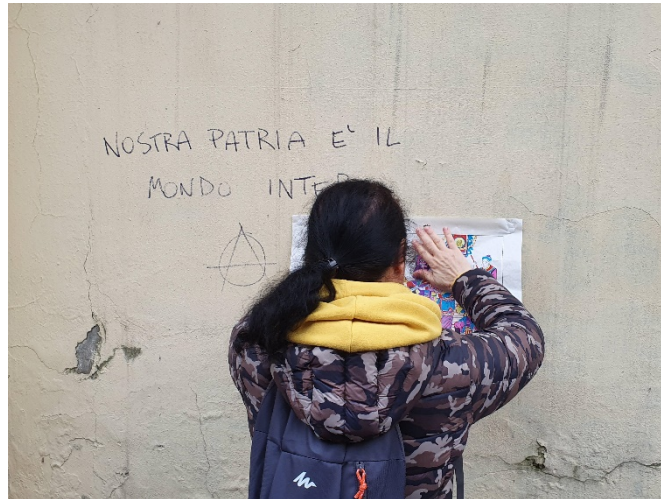


Fig. 4: “Our home is the whole wide world.” A participant in Ai Teng’s intervention posts a nianhua print next to a graffiti with lyrics from the traditional anarchist song “Stornelli d’Esilio” (Pietro Gori, 1895).



Fig. 5: Nianhua prints next to one of the many multilingual “cautionary” street signs installed by the City Council.

It is also important to note how in many instances participants in the intervention chose to distribute nianhua prints directly to passers-by, generating spaces of engagement and

exchange with residents (Figure 6). It was in these instances that the transculturating and antagonistic drive of Teng's action emerged more strongly, destabilizing everyday urban interactions and the exclusionary narratives that still dominate representations of the neighborhood in the local media. As Sequeira notes, artistic interventions that engage with the layered history and immaterial culture of a place through direct contact between artists, participants, and local residents have the potential of turning places of encounter into places of sharing, where all actors involved participate in the collective construction of meanings and of new transcultural imaginaries.<sup>53</sup> It is through this collective act of re-imagining that the antagonistic form of Teng's action becomes apparent. Rejecting the hegemonic construction and representation of Macrolotto Zero as a space dominated by exclusionist and xenophobic narratives that present residents of different nationalities as impermeable to reciprocal transculturation,<sup>54</sup> Teng used the nianhua prints to articulate a participatory intervention, where all social actors involved were encouraged "to act outside or beyond what is known, understood and sanctioned."<sup>55</sup>



Fig. 6: A resident of Macrolotto Zero collects one of the nianhua prints posted in Via Pistoiese.

## **6\_Conclusions**

At the end of the performance, Ai Teng drove away in a bright red Fiat 500; next to her sat Dryphoto's director Vittoria Ciolini. Throughout the performance, the car had remained parked near *Piazza dell'Immaginario*, with a nianhua print selected by the artist glued onto the rear window (Figure 7). The crowd stood by, while a number of business owners standing on the thresholds of their shops were amused by the sight of this unusual assemblage of Chinese and Italian cultural markers cross-cutting the neighborhood. The street soon fell prey to silence again and to the eerie atmosphere of the pre-lockdown phase that would paralyze the country for the following two months. As we left the scene, walking along the street away from the neighborhood and toward Prato's old town, we noticed that no nianhua prints were left on the walls, having moved from the streets of Macrolotto Zero to the private homes and shops of the people who took them. As we reflect on the relevance of this art intervention, we conclude that the legacy of Teng's work resides indeed in the absence of traces on the urban landscape of Macrolotto Zero. As a generative space of dialogue and exchange, the nianhua prints have enabled participants and passers-by to reflect on a mix of signifiers, engaging with the past and present history of the neighborhood and with the encounters between the cultures that inhabit it. As we argued throughout this paper, these signifiers are not immutable, but subject to continuous acts of revision and re-interpretation, a point that echoes in Teng's artworks as well.



Fig. 7: A bright red Fiat 500 remains parked in *Piazza dell'Immaginario* throughout the art performance.

Teng's approach to art interventions resonates with the power of ephemeral urban activism to elicit new imaginaries. As Mekdjian elaborates: "in this limited spatial and temporal interval, the city and urban practices allow the possibility to other imaginaries and practices. The ephemeral is an integral part of how these interventions function; they aim not to install a new system but to constantly destabilize the established and the legitimate."<sup>56</sup> Yet, as we attempted to demonstrate through our historical overview of how the visual landscape of the neighborhood has changed over the years, the case of *Macrolotto Zero* shows how different interventions should not be framed as isolated moments of antagonism. Rather, they should be framed as parts of a complex system of layered, successful and unsuccessful interventions, where formal and informal actions by different stakeholders cooperate, clash, and mix in a continuous and spontaneous process of transcultural placemaking. In this article, we have decided to analyze a project like *Piazza dell'Immaginario*, created by Dryphoto in collaboration with Ecòl,

the City Council of Prato, the Tuscany region, and the Pecci museum. This collaboration has taken on a life of its own, eliciting a rich network of transcultural interactions between local authorities, policy-makers, artists, and local residents that defies clear dichotomies between ameliorative and antagonistic art interventions, as well as static conceptualizations of Chineseness and Italianness. These initiatives, their outcome and longevity cannot be taken for granted but need to be framed within a constant negotiation of access to public space, as well as within conflicts over representation and recognition among various stakeholders. It is noteworthy, for instance, how at the beginning of 2018, the owner of the space whereupon *March 5<sup>th</sup> Square* was opened decided to reclaim the property and repurposed it into an extension of a parking lot situated on the opposite side of the street. In addition to this, we would stress how the majority of the interventions that have successfully turned Macrolotto Zero into a canvas for experimentation has focused on the area between Via Pistoiese and Via Filzi, its two major commercial arteries. Some actions have however delved further into the maze of one-way and dead-end streets that make up the neighborhood, as well as into residential zones and crucial spaces of informal aggregation, such as the local gardens.<sup>57</sup> Yet, more studies and initiatives are needed to engage with these re-imagined spaces and enlarge the geographical frame of the neighborhood, identifying the rich network of formal and informal acts of transculturation that these art interventions interact with, exploring the role of cultural associations and the involvement of the local authorities in this process.

What emerges prominently from our exploratory investigation of how public art has continuously shaped processes of transcultural place-making in Macrolotto Zero is that understanding transcultural re-imaginings of urban space requires further analysis of the interaction and engagement of its residents and business owners with these kinds of events. It also requires the realization that this engagement must extend beyond essentialized understandings of space and communities. As Ricatti, Dutto, and Wilson argue, drawing on the work of Glick Schiller,<sup>58</sup> understanding the transcultural complexity of superdiverse cities like Prato requires researchers to challenge ethno-centric and binary representations of specific ethnic groups through the adoption of transcultural frameworks and the implementation of participatory action methodologies that reconfigure the relations between academics and members of the community, facilitating more productive modes of co-operation and co-creation.<sup>59</sup> In conclusion, in this article we have outlined how participatory art interventions can open up new productive

spaces of transcultural engagement. Our effort has pointed to the relevance of the active role played by researchers and academics in light of both the ongoing impact that the coronavirus crisis has had on the social and economic fabric of superdiverse neighborhoods like Macrolotto Zero, and of the increased difficulties that artists are facing as a result of this tremendous situation. More efforts are needed in this context to maintain such urban spaces open through the development of participatory research projects that adopt arts-based methodologies and involve an activist component.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>2</sup> The city’s museum of contemporary art and one of Tuscany and Italy’s cultural landmarks.
- <sup>3</sup> All photos in the article are by Matteo Dutto, February 2, 2020.
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- <sup>5</sup> Ilaria Vanni, “The Transcultural Edge,” in *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 13.1 (2016), 1–8, here: 7.
- <sup>6</sup> Francesco Ricatti, Matteo Dutto and Rita Wilson, “Ethnic Enclave or Transcultural Edge? Reassessing the Prato District through Digital Mapping,” in *Modern Italy* 24. 4 (2019), 369–81.
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- <sup>11</sup> Kevin Latham and Bin Wu, *Chinese Immigration into the EU: New Trends, Dynamics and Implications* (London: Europe China Research and Advice Network London, 2013), 35, cited in Baldassar et al., *Chinese Migration to Europe*, 1.



- <sup>12</sup> Roberta Raffaetà and Loretta Baldassar, “Spaces Speak Louder than Words: Contesting Social Inclusion through Conflicting Rhetoric about Prato’s Chinatown,” in Baldassar et al., *Chinese Migration to Europe*, 119–128, here: 119.
- <sup>13</sup> Raffaetà and Baldassar, “Spaces Speak Louder than Words,” 119.
- <sup>14</sup> Gabi Dei Ottati, “Il Ruolo Dell’immigrazione Cinese a Prato: Una Rassegna Della Letteratura,” in *Prato: Il Ruolo Della Comunità Cinese*, ed. IRPET Prato (Firenze: Provincia di Prato, 2013), 21–38, here: 22.
- <sup>15</sup> Elizabeth L. Krause and Massimo Bressan, “Via Gramsci: Hegemony and Wars of Position in the Streets of Prato,” in *International Gramsci Journal* 2.3 (2017), 31–66, here: 31.
- <sup>16</sup> Krause and Bressan, “Via Gramsci,” 42.
- <sup>17</sup> Raffaetà and Baldassar, “Spaces Speak Louder than Words,” 121.
- <sup>18</sup> Bressan and Tosi Cambini, “Eterogeneità Culturale e Spazi Pubblici in Un Distretto Industriale,” 230.
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- <sup>22</sup> See Latham and Wu, *Chinese Immigration into the EU*.
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- 40 See Cartiere and Zebracki, *The Everyday Practice of Public Art*, 1; Cartiere and Willis, *The Practice of Public Art*, 3.
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- 47 Cory, Reiner and Möller, "Translocality and Translocal Subjectivities," 21–22.
- 48 By 'commonly' we mean an assemblage of rhetoric including the point of view of Italian conservative and anti-immigrant subjects as well as local Chinese speakers, who refer to the main street of the neighborhood as zhongguo jie (China Street).
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- <sup>56</sup> Mekdjian, “Urban Artist and Migrations,” 47.
- <sup>57</sup> See for instance the 2014 installation of a Camera Obscura in the gardens of Via Colombo, created by the French artist Emma Grosbois: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWCnFuIei-U>>. Dryphoto’s own base of operations is in one of the smaller side streets of Macrolotto Zero, where they organize events regularly.
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