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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Decentring artistic practice beyond national narratives. An analysis of the European pavilion as a post-national model

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Abstract

Background

The national pavilion model, epitomised by the Venice Biennale, functions as an internal cultural border that aligns artistic production with state sovereignty and Eurocentric universality. This representational framework fails to accommodate contemporary, mobile, and post-national artistic practices. To explore an alternative paradigm, this article evaluates Liquid Becomings, a 2024 waterborne project commissioned by the European Cultural Foundation. Navigating four major European rivers—the Danube, Rhine, Vistula, and Tagus—this itinerant civic laboratory sought to test how a post-national community might be lived through fluid, non-extractive practices.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology bridging contemporary curatorial critique with decolonial theory and political geography. Utilizing the framework of the institutional archive versus the embodied repertoire, the empirical analysis juxtaposes official curatorial materials, manifestoes, and video documentation from the four river routes against ex-post reflective accounts of the project's final transition to a land-bound festival in Lisbon.

Results

The river residencies successfully disrupted state-centric visual regimes by shifting the locus of enunciation onto mobile platforms.

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The routes reconceptualized European borders through decolonial delinking, relational opacity, hydrofeminist ecology, and human-powered navigation. However, translating these slow, somatic, and non-representational practices into an urban festival in Lisbon generated significant structural friction, revealing a fundamental disconnect between the transient embodied repertoire of the river journeys and the spectacle-driven expectations of land-based cultural institutions.

Conclusions

The study concludes that the material absence, insularity, and spatial diffusion observed at the Lisbon festival do not represent operational failures. Synthesising participatory aesthetics, the distribution of the sensible, and agonistic pluralism, the article demonstrates that these frictions constitute a radical aesthetic of withdrawal that evades institutional capture and resists state-sanctioned narratives of European identity.

Keywords
European Cultural Studies; Post-national Aesthetics; Cultural Democracy; Institutional Critique; The European Pavilion; Decoloniality; Borderities.

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Introduction

Since its establishment at the end of the nineteenth century, the Venice Biennale has relied on the national pavilion as its primary exhibition structure; however, since it mirrors the Western-centric geopolitical order of the modern nation-state, this artistic infrastructure does not operate as a neutral exhibition format, but as a cultural framework that naturalises the alignment between art, territory, and sovereignty (Sassatelli 42–45).

The European Cultural Foundation thus conceived, initiated and funded the European Pavilion as a direct intervention against this rigid architecture, and as part of its endeavour, in 2024 it financed the project 'Liquid Becomings', with the intention of mapping an alternative cartography of the continent by abandoning permanent material structures and embracing fluid, nomadic geographies. This waterborne pavilion stems from an urgent need to counter the rise of exclusionary nationalisms, resurgent border regimes, and the top-down cultural diplomacy that tends to absorb political critique and make it acceptable enough to be included within traditional gallery walls. To achieve this, the project was executed through a methodology of deliberate uncertainty and shared vulnerability, physically shifting the creative process onto agile boats where multidisciplinary artistic groups could live and work in close proximity to the shifting realities of Europe's peripheral landscapes. By prioritizing slow, non-extractive encounters over the production of public spectacle, Liquid Becomings (2024) sought to test how a post-national community might be lived and felt, and what artistic practices do we need to uphold it, in contrast with the ones currently sustained by the nation-state system.

This article approaches the two pavilion models through a theoretical constellation drawn from the works of Walter D. Mignolo (2011), Djamila Ribeiro (2017), Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2010; 2016), and Étienne Balibar (2003; 2004; 2009), among others. From the decolonial perspective, the pavilion appears as an epistemic structure rooted in Eurocentric modernity, regulating visibility and authority through the reproduction of colonial hierarchies under the guise of universality. This is, according to Mignolo, a reaction of Western powers to their decline in hegemony that he calls 'rewesternization' (68–74), which he describes as one of three main trajectories for the future, with the other options being 'dewesternization', where the power would shift to the East, and 'decoloniality', the breaking away from the entire system of power. From the perspective of Balibar's political philosophy, the pavilion can be read as an internal cultural border, acting as an institutional mechanism that produces inclusion and exclusion within Europe itself, shaping who may appear as a legitimate cultural subject.

Read together, these perspectives allow us to understand the pavilion as a bordering apparatus that operates culturally rather than territorially, an understanding that resonates with Mezzadra and Neilson's (2013) insistence that borders are not marginal lines but productive mechanisms, as 'borders are equally devices of inclusion that select and filter people and different forms of circulation in ways no less violent than those deployed in exclusionary measures' (7). Framed in this way, the pavilion appears less as a 'neutral' representational container, and more as an institutional system that regulates artistic mobility and visibility. Against this backdrop, the emergence of Liquid Becomings promoted a different artistic practice, one mobilised not for representation but as a site of resistance and re-imagination.

Methodology

To analyse how Liquid Becomings dismantled the national pavilion paradigm, this paper adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology that bridges contemporary curatorial and institutional critique with decolonial analysis. Investigating a project that deliberately eschews permanent material production requires a shift from traditional art-historical object analysis toward what Diana Taylor conceptualises as the split between the archive and the repertoire. While the institutional archive consists of documents and physical monuments, the repertoire encompasses a multiplicity of temporary relational encounters. This paper treats the 28-day water-bound journeys as an active repertoire that resists standard institutional curation. The empirical evidence sustaining this study relies on the juxtaposition of the project's curatorial discourse against its internal institutional friction. Textual and visual discourse analysis of the materials produced by the pan-European consortium—consisting of Espaço AgoraNow, FLOW, MS-Fusion, Teatro Meia Volta, and United Artist Labour—and the commissioning body, reveals how the organisers intended to construct a decentralised, post-national imaginary. This involved interpreting the official curatorial blueprints, internal documents, programmatic manifestos, social media presence, and video documentation of the four river routes through their specific thematic trajectories defined as 'Perimeters', 'Bodies and Politics', 'Togetherness', and 'Ruins and Monsters'.

This idealised curatorial rhetoric is balanced against the material realities detailed in ex-post reflections, which provide important information regarding the structural friction, perceived insularity, and audience disconnection that occurred when the project transitioned from the fluid approach of the residencies to the land-bound festival in Lisbon. These findings are treated as empirical evidence of the resistance that occurs when radical and nomadic art practices confront fixed institutional structures. By intersecting the official curatorial aspirations with these retrospective analyses, the methodology avoids a purely celebratory reading of the project, positioning the study as an independent evaluation of

curatorial intentionality, institutional conflict, and spatial theory to analyse the radical potential of material absence in contemporary political art.

Delinking the Pavilion: Art, Territories, and Power

The conceptual genesis of the European Pavilion emerged from a provocation: why is there no unified space dedicated to Europe itself on the major artistic stages of the continent, most notably the Venice Biennale?

The attempt made by the European Cultural Foundation was not to resolve this question by erecting yet another static monument, but to conceive an open-ended exploration of who defines, occupies, and is excluded from the European space, and undisputably, the arts have historically played a critical role in articulating dissent and imagining alternatives. From avant-garde movements responding to early twentieth-century nationalism to contemporary practices addressing colonial legacies and racialised violence, art has always functioned as both a site of critique and a space of collective experimentation. However, as noted by Gregory Sholette and Gene Ray (2008), the political potential of artwork is often neutralised by how it is organised within institutional frameworks, which absorb criticality without doing anything to change the underlying power structures. This is exemplified by the persistence of the national pavilion model in contemporary art, that through embedding artistic practice within state narratives, it converts political critique into institutionalised top-down cultural diplomacy. The European Pavilion, instead, proposed an alternative that aimed at reinventing the conditions under which artistic practices are produced and encountered.

To fully comprehend the political and epistemological implications of the European Pavilion, we must locate its decentring drive within a larger constellation of critical theory that includes decolonial thought, post-national aesthetics, and political philosophy. Walter D. Mignolo defines decentring as 'delinking', a decolonial shift in the axis of power and visibility, and a move away from Eurocentric and nation-based epistemologies toward plural and situated knowledges (54). Delinking, in this sense, does not entail an acritical inclusion but a complete reconfiguration of who produces knowledge, from where, and under what conditions. Mignolo's critique of Western modernity centres on what the philosopher Santiago Castro-Gomez termed 'hubris of the zero point' (in Mignolo xxviii), the colonial assumption that the European perspective is a detached, universal and invisible observer capable of seeing the entire world without being seen itself. In the context of international exhibitions like the Venice Biennale, this hubris remains visible in the permanent national pavilions of the Giardini, that constructed during the heights of nineteenth-century European imperial expansion, function as the physical architecture of this zero-point. This infrastructure forces global artistic production to be classified, judged, and made visible through a Eurocentric apparatus hiding behind the mask of global neutrality, revealing the structural manifestation of what Mignolo calls 'rewesternization'. To counter this Eurocentric framing, Mignolo insists on the recovery of the 'locus of enunciation' (xv), meaning the explicit recognition that all knowledge and cultural production is always geo-politically and body-politically situated. This concept was expanded by Djamila Ribeiro, whose theorisation of the locus of enunciation, or *lugar de fala*, in her book *O que é lugar de fala?* unpacks how structural and social positionalities fundamentally dictate who has the authority to speak, thereby disrupting the myth of a neutral, universal voice. Ribeiro argues that the zero-point hubris of dominant groups relies on a strategic invisibility, and that by disguising as a universal standard, the dominant group conceals its specific geography of power. To demand and reclaim a *lugar de fala* does not imply reducing critique to an essentialist identity politics, but forcing an interrogation of the institutional conditions that render certain discourses legitimate while treating marginalised perspectives as affective, localised, or biased. By insisting that all enunciation is body-politically and geopolitically tethered to a system of historical oppressions and privileges, Ribeiro provides the tools to dismantle the coloniality of power within cultural institutions, ensuring that speaking is understood as a political act of situational accountability rather than a performance of universal neutrality. Reclaiming this locus requires breaking the institutional frameworks that isolate or exoticize peripheral subjects, while simultaneously preventing them from being neutralised by a superficial institutional inclusivity. As Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui warns, modern liberal structures frequently employ a shallow multicultural rhetoric to mask ongoing colonial hierarchies, and to resist this institutional co-optation, she proposes the concept of the *ch'ixi*[1], a state of blotchy coexistence where differences do not dissolve into harmony, but remain instead in an active and productive state of friction. Combined, these decolonial lenses demand that a post-national pavilion must do more than display diverse content, and shift the structural locus of enunciation to embrace an uncomfortable *ch'ixi* style of contamination that rejects state-sanctioned narratives of identity. By switching from the fixed architecture of the Giardini to the decentralised model of the European Pavilion, and especially the floating model of Liquid Becomings, the project attempts to move beyond a superficial change in aesthetic content and enters the domain of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 54), rejecting the state's role as the sole validator of culture, and instead prioritising 'thinking from the borders'.

[1] *ch'ixi* is one of the concepts from the triad that Rivera Cusicanqui (2016) developed to theorise decolonial friction, and she describes it as *'gris, con manchas menudas de blanco y negro que se entreveran'* (326), that translates to 'gray, with tiny spots of black and white that intermingle', representing a coexistence of differences that never fully blend into a homogenous third element.

This decolonial delinking departs from the assumption that knowledge must be fixed to a static territory to possess validity, and by being epistemically disobedient, it disrupts the traditional hierarchy between a European cultural centre and its perceived peripheries. However, rather than attempting to reform the Western mindset from within its own permanent institutions, this framework establishes the need for a knowledge pluriversality, that applied to the artistic mechanics of Liquid Becomings, it manifests in the refusal of the architectural fixity of the traditional static pavilion model in favour of boats, thus materially disrupting the state's zero-point hubris, and insisting that knowledge and cultural meaning are generated through fluid, situated relations. This decolonial critique of the geopolitical zero-point gains even more urgency when read alongside Nicholas Mirzoeff's (2011) theorisation of the regime of visibility, through which the nation-state does not merely police its borders through walls or decrees, but it maintains power through a highly constructed visual apparatus that dictates who has the authority to look, who and what can be seen, and whose presence is to be rendered invisible. To challenge this top-down ordering of space, Mirzoeff proposes the concept of the 'right to look' (1–34), an autonomous, non-hierarchical claim to political subjectivity, and a desire for a direct and reciprocal human encounter that refuses to be categorized or managed by the state's visual pattern. Decentring artistic practice, therefore, requires more than shifting geographic locations, and demands a fundamental disruption of this state-sanctioned regime of visibility; by practicing a decolonial 'right to look', art can subvert the sovereign gaze by carving out alternative and unmonitored spaces of encounter that reject the imperial ordering of both geography and visual representation.

Understanding how exclusionary visual regimes still play a role in today's institutions requires tracing the genealogy of the national pavilion back to the 19th-century World Fairs and Great Exhibitions. Instruments of imperialism and competitive nationalism, they were designed to be physical spaces where the dominant Western empires could survey and map the world, exploit their colonial extractions, and assert their superiority over other peripheral nations through 'civilisation'. By adopting this pavilion-based architecture at the turn of the 20th century, the Venice Biennale institutionalised its imperial logic within the cultural realm, thus maintaining a 19th century geopolitical structure well into nowadays, still serving as an architectural manifestation of colonial hierarchy and state sovereignty that solidifies the nation-state as the pinnacle of cultural legitimacy. In order to prevent critical, post-national artistic practices from being reabsorbed and annulled, a contemporary project cannot simply place diverse programming within these pavilions, but must instead be materially displaced through alternative models, completely eschewing the centralised pavilion one.

Nikos Papastergiadis's (2006) work on post-national and translocal aesthetics provides the bridge between Mignolo's epistemic delinking and Balibar's border philosophy, grounding these concepts directly within the changing conditions of contemporary artistic practice. He argues that contemporary art increasingly emerges from conditions of mobility, translation, and displacement, producing complex cultural forms that cannot be adequately contained within or explained by monolithic national narratives (112–18). From this perspective, aesthetic value is then to be generated through relationality, unexpected friction, and translocal exchange; therefore, decentring functions simultaneously as an analytical tool and a radical strategy that deliberately privileges process, encounter, and multiplicity over fixed identity or stable artistic mediums. To fully unpack this translocal framework, Papastergiadis's critique must be set against the traditional container theory of cultural institutions, which assumes that art must be a discrete object housed safely within a physical gallery, while he proposes instead a new aesthetics of conduct, where art becomes the temporary, relational micro-societies formed during an event, or a journey. When applied to a decentralised artistic project, this framework reveals that the true value of an intervention may reside entirely in its ephemerality, and by focussing on the immediate lived conditions of mobility rather than the production of public spectacle, such practices actively resist the institutional pressure to transform genuine localised experiences into a flat, easily digestible cultural product for global consumption. He thus reframes the absence of permanent physical traces as structural success, for when artworks are experienced only by those on the move, those directly involved, or those in their immediate vicinities, they evade the extractive, commodifying logic of the institutional apparatus, proving that a post-national aesthetic must be lived and felt rather than archived in a centralised exhibition frame.

Étienne Balibar's work on Europe, borders, and citizenship offers yet another critical lens through which to understand the stakes of decentring artistic practice. In his article from 2009, he conceptualised Europe as a permanent site of tension between inclusion and exclusion, which he termed as the 'borderland' condition of Europe; here, borders are not simply geographical lines, but dispersed and ubiquitous mechanisms that operate within the very heart of societies, producing differential access to rights and visibility. Applied to the cultural field, this perspective reveals how artistic institutions, including the national pavilion, function as internal borders that regulate and determine who can appear, speak, and be recognised as a cultural subject. Equally crucial to this analysis is his notion of equaliberty, or *égaliberté*, the structural proposition that equality and freedom are not separate values but strictly co-dependent, and the limitation or denial of one inevitably destroys the conditions for the other. Similarly to a nation-state, a cultural framework that promises absolute freedom of aesthetic expression while simultaneously reproducing unequal, state-centric, or exclusionary national conditions of participation ultimately undermines the very democratic ideals it claims to represent. To transcend this

paradox, Balibar argues that a genuinely post-national European space cannot be forged by constructing a centralised super-state or a homogeneous cultural identity but must operate as a radical, continuous, and shifting practice where political and cultural meanings are constantly cross-used, negotiated, and uprooted across boundaries. It is within this specific framework of democratic practice that his concept of the vanishing mediator becomes a tool for the cultural sector. He suggests that transitioning away from the exhausted structures of the nation-state toward a new transnational political imagination requires the strategic self-erasure of intermediary frameworks. The European Pavilion's attempt to decentre national representation can thus be read as an effort to perform this exact mediation, catalysing a temporary transnational space. As a vanishing mediator, the formal structure of Liquid Becomings as a decentralised project is designed to dissolve once it has successfully unlinked artistic practice from the nation-state framework, and rather than accumulating symbolic capital or archiving its own permanence, the floating pavilion fulfils its radical political potential by fading, leaving behind only a blueprint of how collective citizenship and cultural democracy can be redrawn and contested.

This constellation of decolonial, translocal, and border theories receives further critical institutional grounding through Monica Sassatelli's (2009) critique of European cultural policies and exhibition frameworks. She demonstrates that international cultural institutions, most notably the national pavilions of the Venice Biennale, do not function as neutral spaces of creative display, but they actively reproduce and legitimise symbolic hierarchies inherited directly from colonial and imperial histories (67–70). Within this persistent architecture, dominant Western nations are continuously positioned as the undisputed, universal cultural centres, while non-Western or peripheral European nations are systematically relegated to the margins or forced to perform highly curated versions of territorial identity. This exposes a profound tension at the heart of contemporary European integration, because while the official rhetoric champions a borderless, unified European identity, institutional practices continuously appoint the nation-state as the primary holder of cultural power. When read alongside Sholette and Ray's questioning of the presumed neutrality of the national frame, Sassatelli's analysis reveals how these traditional structures operate as mechanisms of depoliticization, absorbing critical art and transforming it into top-down cultural diplomacy. Consequently, any genuine attempt to foster true cultural democracy cannot entail forcefully inserting diverse and marginalized voices into the existing pavilion system, requiring instead a fundamental structural reconfiguration of how European identity is performed and negotiated. In light of this, the European Cultural Foundation's deliberate refusal to participate in the traditional Biennale pavilion structure emerges as a pivotal act of institutional withdrawal and disobedience. Rather than seeking visibility within a compromised, colonialist infrastructure, this refusal creates the necessary vacuum required to build alternative, post-national models, such as Liquid Becomings, that operate according to entirely different temporalities, values, and fluid topographies.

Liquid becomings: Navigating the Post-National Borderland

Unlike traditional pavilions, the European Pavilion operated as a decentralised and networked model that supported collectives and artistic initiatives across multiple European contexts, and by challenging the concentration of symbolic cultural capital typically associated with major international art fairs, it resisted their spectacle-driven logic. Central to this model was a commitment to collaboration over competition, and process over product. Rather than selecting individual artists to represent a unified vision of Europe, the project foregrounded collective practices that reflect the continent's internal heterogeneity and contested histories. According to François Matarasso, cultural democracy is not simply about increasing access to institutions that tend to view the public, or a certain segment of the public, (Matarasso, 2019; see also Belfiore and Bennett, 2008) as lacking in culture and needing to be enlightened, but mainly about changing the way power is distributed through culture. His concept of 'restless art' in his eponymous book, refuses to be defined in static terms and insists on being an active force within the world, serving as an example of this shift from the idea of the citizen-spectator to the citizen-actor, who is involved in creating and defining their own culture rather than being its passive recipient. There are, of course, contradictions and hazards to this model too; artists must be mindful of the potential disparities in resource access within the communities they encounter, the varying levels of institutional capacity, and the persistent power imbalances between established cultural centres and peripheral regions. Therefore, any critical engagement with the European Pavilion must maintain an awareness of the risks associated with the potential to create or perpetuate inequality under the guise of decentralisation.

The project was organised as a travelling pavilion that would use a set of four modular, eco-designed boats to navigate four main European rivers – the Danube, Rhine, Vistula, and Tagus– and travel across a total of eleven countries. Naomi Russell (2025), co-founder of the artist-led collective Espaço AgoraNow and one of the conceivers of Liquid Becomings, revealed that the project was never intended to articulate a coherent vision of Europe, nor to stabilise Europe as the primary horizon of political imagination, but was conceived from a stance of deliberate uncertainty, working from peripheries rather than centres, and approaching the beginning of the journeys from a position of not-knowing. This attitude is a direct enactment of Mignolo's epistemic disobedience, for by beginning from a place of not-knowing, the project rejects the hubris of the zero point, prioritising situated knowledges and recognising that the locus of enunciation

is rooted in the physical and political reality of the river itself. This embrace of uncertainty finds a deeper resonance in Donna Haraway's call for staying with the trouble, which means learning to be truly present in thick, complex, and often painful realities without seeking a quick fix or a universal solution. On the rivers, this meant refusing to resolve the tensions of the border into a tidy European identity, and dwelling instead in the messy political entanglements of the water. The organisational structure of Liquid Becomings further reinforced its post-national orientation, as artists were invited through existing translocal networks, and selected collectively by curators embedded in different regional contexts, with each boat hosting a deliberately heterogeneous group of practitioners: writers, performers, sound artists, documentarians … thus emphasising polyphony and multiplicity over coherence.

Across all routes, engagement with local communities unfolded in cautious and often improvised ways, making a conscious effort to avoid extractive forms of participation, which Matarasso warns occur when institutions treat communities as raw material for artistic production rather than as equal co-creators. By favouring small-scale, intimate encounters, the project aligned with the true principles of cultural democracy, valuing moments such as villagers bringing bread after storms, or spontaneous riverside conversations, for their potential to generate subtle shifts in perception. These instances were what Mignolo would term 'border thinking' in practice, or knowledge produced at the margins of the official journey. Unfortunately, the project's short timeline, spanning only eleven months from commission to conclusion, presented a major structural obstacle, because it brought to light the conflict between the slowness necessary for a true stay with the trouble and the rapid pace of neoliberal cultural funding that requires an ultimate proof of completion. This is because creating meaningful relationships and being present in complex social realities necessitates a temporal commitment that institutional funding cycles rarely allow, and as expected, the culmination of Liquid Becomings in a multidisciplinary festival in Lisbon revealed further tensions between the process of decentred artistic practice and event-based expectations. While the journeys themselves constituted the core of the pavilion, institutional pressures to produce a final public moment exposed the difficulty of translating slow practices into conventional formats of display. This friction reflects Chantal Mouffe's (2013) notion of agonism[2], as the festival became a site of struggle between the radical non-linear logic of the river, and the linear representational demands of the European cultural apparatus. The festival, in many ways, acted as that internal border conceptualised by Balibar, attempting to filter the messy reality of the water into an assimilable cultural product for the centre. Through its conceptual framing, organisational structure, and lived enactment, Liquid Becomings exemplifies both the possibilities and the fragilities of decentralised artistic practice, while its emphasis on slowness, vulnerability, and collective risk-taking offers a powerful counterpoint to dominant cultural logics of speed, visibility, and extraction. By navigating the rivers, the boats inhabited the European borderland, leaving behind a pluriversal repertoire of what Europe might become when it finally decides to let go of its zero-point hubris.

This fluid, decentralised navigation of European borders becomes particularly visible when analysing the specific geopolitical realities of the Danube route, curated by Bojan Đorđev and Siniša Ilić under the banner of 'Bodies and Politics'. Sailing through Hungary, Croatia, and Serbia, the trimaran MS Fusion encountered the lines between Schengen and non-Schengen zones not as the abstract political concepts we are used to hearing resonate within Brussels' walls, but as the heavily policed and unfortunately very healthy infrastructure of control along the Balkan migration route. By weaving Chantal Mouffe's (2013) theory of agonistic democracy directly into Paul B. Preciado's critique of somatopolitical hierarchies[3], we can trace how systemic borders operate simultaneously on spatial, institutional, and corporeal levels, and on the MS Fusion these vectors of power collided, transforming the river into an inherently agonistic space where the physical bodies of the artists themselves—some holding European passports, others presenting non-Schengen documentation—navigated a landscape characterised by systemic violence, pushbacks, and the silent erasure of those attempting to cross the same waters in search of survival. Thus, the residency's theoretical friction was rooted in a tragic material reality: while the artists negotiated the ambiguity of the river, Fortress Europe's racist and exclusionary migration policies actively weaponised these waters, resulting in the drownings of migrants across the Balkan route rivers. The ephemerality of the artistic practices carried out during the residence was strongly influenced by this structural fragmentation of the collective based on legal status, and a stable public exhibition is made impossible when state surveillance undermines the very right to travel and live together as a community, while the river serves as a cemetery for unmourned individuals. As such, the creative process deliberately scales down into immediate, undisplayable routines on the water, witnessed almost exclusively by those on the boats and the riverside communities. By focusing on these ephemeral moments, the participants' physical bodies defied the border apparatus and became the project's main living archive, or what Taylor refers to as 'repertoire'. The creation of tangible items that can be displayed to perform national prestige is the foundation of the conventional art institution, so the residency counterbalanced this tendency by turning art

[2]This concept of agonism does not imply antagonism, but a democratic sublimation through which conflicting parties recognise each other as legitimate adversaries sharing a common symbolic space.

[3]Preciado defines somatopolitical governance as the historical shift where sovereign power moves from managing territories to directly policing and coding the biological body. On the Danube, this manifests as the border control apparatus rendering certain migratory bodies illegal or disposable based purely on biometric and bureaucratic classifications.

into a personal, physical experience that refused to supply said institution with commodifiable artefacts by limiting the creative process to immediate, undisplayable actions. The project's methodology of beginning from a position of not-knowing allowed this friction to breathe freely, ensuring that the pavilion remained a space of pluralistic epistemological struggle, thus allowing the somatic archive of the Danube route to delink artistic practice from the nation-state securitised system.

The dismantling of national singularity is further complicated by the Rhine river route, which focused on the theme of 'Togetherness'. By concentrating on uncovering the diverse and suppressed migrant histories and peripheral memories embedded along the river's heavily developed banks, this residence witnessed an ultra-industrialized economic artery of Western Europe as it navigated from the German Rhineland centres of Cologne and Düsseldorf into the Dutch deltas of Utrecht and Rotterdam. When the crew was momentarily trapped inside a huge river lock and had to personally experience the opening of the industrial gates that control the river's rhythm, the painful truth of this mechanical infrastructure became tangible, just as the climate precarity of these waters became apparent when severe weather hit, forcing the crew into a high-speed sprint to outrun severe winds and seek shelter. Yet, amid these industrial and environmental disruptions, the residency carved out intentional spaces for momentary respite, such as pausing in Arnhem to celebrate the Autumn Equinox as a collective ritual of harvesting, holding, and letting go. In fact, the Rhine route should be looked at through the lens of Édouard Glissant's (1997) *Poetics of Relation*, where he rejects the imperial concept of a single, root-bound identity that claims an exclusive territory, proposing instead a 'rhizomatic' one (11–18) formed through open, continuous, and transformative encounters with difference. On this river, the artistic interventions functioned precisely as a rhizomatic network, for by engaging with the lived realities of the diasporic communities inhabiting these economic and industrial landscapes, the participating artists treated the river as a site of shared, intersecting trajectories, and by prioritising oral histories, localised soundscapes, and fleeting site-specific encounters over permanent physical objects, the Rhine route enacted Glissant's concept of opacity, the right of peripheral identities to remain unmeasurable and uncapturable by the dominant state apparatus. The knowledge generated on the vessel was thus fundamentally relational, proving that a post-national Europe must emerge from the complex, non-linear undertows of its migrant memories.

This investigation of Europe's contested boundaries deepened along the Vistula river route under the designated theme of 'Perimeters'. However, rather than reinforcing a strictly geopolitical lens, the artistic approach on the Vistula reconceptualised perimeters through an ecological framework. By treating the river as a living, non-human actor, the crew confronted the artificial boundaries of the contemporary nation-state through a lens of environmental interconnectedness. This shifted the focus from rigid political borders to fluid, ecological thresholds, illustrating how water systems actively disregard and overflow the territorial limitations imposed by human governance (Kaika, 2005); consequently, this approach should be read through the lenses of Astrida Neimanis' concept of hydrofeminism. While state-centred cartography attempts to impose rigid border walls along the European eastern frontier, hydrofeminism radically disrupts this logic by framing the river, the human, and the non-human as porous and interconnected 'bodies of water'. Guided by this ideology, the Polish collective FLOW – under the curatorial direction of Agnieszka Brzeżańska, Ewa Ciepielewska, and Maria Magdalena Kozłowska – focused on the ecological realities of the Vistula, navigating between Warsaw and Krakow on board a traditional, flat-bottomed wooden galar. Essential to their work on the river was the idea of 'rewilding' as a purposeful approach to end the alienated 'urban trance' of contemporary civilisation, and dispel extractivist ideas of human control over nature, presenting deep ecological engagement as a physiological and emotional necessity achieved by adjusting to the erratic flow of the river, particularly during severe rains and flooding. In this context, 'rewilding' does not operate as a traditional ecological project of species reintroduction, but as a rewilding of human subjectivity itself, functioning as a somatic unlearning of the anthropocentric hierarchies that separate the body from the biosphere, rendering human perception as fluid and interconnected as the currents they navigate. By taking this route, the project was able to collaborate with local networks and communities that protect Poland's wild topography, which meant physically and imaginatively embedding themselves in the ecology of the water, working alongside local river activists such as the *Siostry Rzeki* (River Sisters)[4], and engaging in campfire discussions along the route at stops such as Kazimierz Dolny and Sandomierz, in order to address the environmental challenges of the landscape. During the journey and through these genuine encounters, the bodies became porous archives of the river habitat, and the knowledge produced travelled endosomatically[5] with the participants.

[4]The *Siostry Rzeki* (River Sisters) is a Polish eco-feminist coalition of artists and activists who perform ritualised, public actions, often using song, traditional dresses, and placards bearing the names of threatened rivers, to protest the damming and industrial exploitation of Poland's waterways.

[5]By 'endosomatic memory' this paper refers to knowledge that is physically integrated into the bodily habits and oral repertoires of the subjects, rather than being externalized 'exosomatically' into material objects. This distinction is central to understanding how the transient river journeys defy the extractive, object-oriented capture of traditional curatorial frameworks.

The final journey on the Tagus, developed in partnership with the Portuguese performance collective Teatro Meia Volta, brought European overlapping historical crises to the shores of the Iberian Peninsula with the theme of 'Ruins and Monsters', and flowing from Spain to Lisbon, it forced the travelling pavilion to confront the ghosts of Europe's imperial project. Given the shallowness of this river, the crew deployed a newly engineered ultralight vessel developed by Rainer Prohaska: the MS-Fusion Ultra, manoeuvrable entirely via a mix of solar power and direct human rowing, pushing the project's ecological methodology into a highly vulnerable state of self-reliance, turning navigation into an act of collective trust and sensory attunement. By physically crossing the border from Spain into Portugal via these slow (Uzikaeva, 2025), human-powered methods, the residency systematically disrupted the logic of rapid, high-emission modern transit. The Tagus' estuary, which served as a springboard for the so-called Age of Discovery and the consequent colonial extraction, is dotted by stone monoliths like the Torre de Belém, the spice-tax-funded Mosteiro dos Jerónimos and the twentieth-century Padrão dos Descobrimentos, forming a dense visual apparatus built to celebrate what Édouard Glissant terms the 'arrowlike nomadism' (12–19)[6] of imperial identity, indicating a violent, vertical logic of singular origin, conquest, and territorial mapping, which can be directly reconducted to colonial necropolitics, which is how Achille Mbembe (2003) defines the sovereign power to dictate who matters and who is disposable, a logic that persists today in Europe's deadly maritime border regimes and environmental sacrifice zones. The artistic practices along the Tagus systematically disrupted this imperial temporality, as the residency framed the river as a site of ongoing ecological and human loss, resisting the nation-state's attempt to sanitise its colonial past through cultural heritage discourse. This critical unease is echoed in Gonçalo M. Tavares's *Fables of Wickedness for a Liquid Europe*, published in The European Review of Books as a literary centrepiece of the project's final convergence in Lisbon. The allegorical parables of cages, walls, and borders interrogate us on whether European unity can ever exist without illusion, warning that a singular, fixed point of belonging can itself become an administrative trap. By taking stock of the material decay, the voices of the marginalised, and Tavares's unsettling fables, the Tagus route transformed the approach to Lisbon into an urgent decolonial reckoning, ensuring that the project's arrival on dry land was already haunted by the structural exclusions of the European sociopolitical landscape.

Ultimately, the boats succeeded at functioning as Balibar's vanishing mediators: transitory, sovereign-defying spaces that facilitated an embodied crossover between nations, they acted as a bridge toward the possibility of reconfiguring post-national political imaginations. Once the collective choreography of the voyage successfully delinked artistic practice from the constraints of the nation-state model, the formal structure of the pavilion dissolved, having fulfilled its role as a catalyst for a pluralistic and untraceable European imaginary. Life on board the vessels unfolded as a form of collective choreography shaped by slowness, shared labour, and vulnerability, producing an intense awareness of landscape and social encounter that stands in sharp contrast to the accelerated rhythms of contemporary cultural production, allowing artistic responses to develop in relation to these deliberate conditions.

This water-bound praxis can be understood as a collective reclamation of the locus of enunciation as articulated by Djamila Ribeiro, as through the shifting of the *lugar de fala* from fixed institutional land to the unstable surface of the rivers, the project dismantled the zero-point hubris that typically governs European cultural representation. Finally, the authority to define Europe was no longer held by a falsely universal centre, but inextricably connected to the specific, situated experiences of the artists and the communities they encountered along the margins, and in so doing, Liquid Becomings did more than representing Cusicanqui's *ch'ixi*: it weaponized it as an explicit refusal of the Western impulse toward the synthetic harmony of liberal multiculturalism. The four river routes created an ecology of radical parallel coexistence and functioned as separate, unblended realities, exposing the ornamental rhetoric of a borderless universality that institutions frequently use to conceal enduring colonial hierarchies, a rhetoric that Cusicanqui refers to as *ch'enko*[7]. The residency, by emphasising immediate and undisplayable practices alongside the vulnerability of navigating through legal fractures and environmental degradation, forced the violent contrast – *allqa*[8] in the Potosí language – of Europe's current crises to remain fully visible, while the knowledge generated spread endosomatically among the participants, supporting Cusicanqui's claim that genuine decolonial memory is found in the marginalised gut, breath, and physical experience rather than in the written word of the elite *letrado* archive.

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[6]Glissant contrasts the imperialist 'arrowlike root' (*racine flèche*), indicating a singular, aggressive, and vertical origin that seeks to conquer, claim, and map exclusive territorial sovereignty, with the 'rhizomatic root' (*racine rhizome*), championing a plural, horizontal network of identity formed through continuous, fluid, and non-hegemonic relation with difference without demanding a singular centre. He also distinguishes 'arrowlike nomadism' from 'circular nomadism', because while the former characterises imperial ventures that depart from a fixed centre to conquer and map a peripheral territory, the latter describes a state of relational, non-exclusive wandering where identity is continuously transformed by the encounter with the Other.

[7]*ch'enko* (or *ch'inqu*) is the second term from Rivera Cusicanqui's conceptual triad, defined as a *'maraña de cosas en este mundo. Enredo de ideas y pensamientos.'* (154; 2010), which can be translated as a tangle of things, an entanglement of ideas.

[8]To disrupt this institutional entanglement, Cusicanqui points to the third term of her conceptual triad, the *allqa*, defined as a *'combinación de dos colores con un contraste nítido'* (153; 2010), a combination of two colours with a sharp contrast, which forces the irreconcilable hierarchy of colonial and geopolitical violence to remain completely visible.

This tension between the fluid, unmapped process of the residencies and the rigid demand of institutional legibility becomes undeniably visible when looking at the final transition to the multidisciplinary festival in Lisbon, which was perceived as confined, with a high degree of spatial diffusion, and a limited public reach. These characteristics might be regarded as systemic failures within the standard, indicators-driven cultural frameworks, but they could equally be understood as the direct consequence of a deliberate curatorial methodology that prioritised localised immersion over immediate, public consumption. When the slow water journeys abruptly ended for the final public presentation, the structural friction of the entire decentralised model was laid bare, and the project's reliance on what Diana Taylor (2003) conceptualises as the 'repertoire' over the 'archive' became an overt act of institutional defiance. In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, she argues that dominant Western systems of knowledge and cultural institutions have historically privileged the archive as the sole legitimate repository of historical memory and cultural value, as it sustains the illusion of permanence and objectivity while working to civilise and control meaning over time. Conversely, the repertoire encompasses embodied ephemeral practices, spoken word, live performance, oral histories, and fleeting encounters that exist only in the precise moment of their enactment. Rather than being housed in a physical repository, the repertoire is stored endosomatically within the bodies and memories of the participants themselves, remaining fundamentally resistant to external capture. By forcing the slow-paced, somatic repertoire of the river routes into the compressed, event-based format of an urban festival, Liquid Becomings exposed an unbridgeable systemic gap between these two competing registers. While the initial curatorial blueprint envisioned Lisbon as a speculative public-facing occasion designed to discuss the knowledge generated on the rivers, the reality of the event exposed a radical disconnect between the intimacy of the water residencies and the spectacle-driven demands of the festival. Of the vast array of situational actions, relational encounters, and localised interventions developed during the journeys, only a minor fraction could be physically or conceptually translated onto land, as they were not designed to leave behind material traces or reproducible documentation, and this material absence at the festival site directly challenged the standard operational logic of the cultural apparatus. The institutional frameworks of large cultural foundations and urban festivals tend to operate on a logic of visibility, requiring objects, clear criteria, and public spectacles to validate their funding and perform their post-national ideals to a generalised audience, but forcing an artistic process rooted entirely in the transient repertoire to conform to these archival expectations created an intense, unproductive friction. Ultimately, the 'insularity' and 'diffusion' noted in one of the ex-post reports functioned as a vital methodological shield that protected the artistic process from being extracted, commodified, and packaged as a digestible cultural product, while the visible fragmentation, empty spaces, and missing documentation encountered by audiences in Lisbon did not signify a failure of execution, but the structural refusal of the repertoire to be captured, civilised, or monitored by the traditional archival apparatus.

Conclusive reflections – The radical Aesthetics of material absence

The structural friction, perceived insularity, and material emptiness that characterised the final presentation in Lisbon should not be evaluated as a thorough unsuccessful implementation, for they constitute instead a profound and politically charged manifestation of what Claire Bishop (2012) conceptualises as the critical imperative of participatory aesthetics. In her *Artificial Hells*, Bishop fiercely critiques the institutional tendency to judge socially engaged, collaborative art through the lenses of harmonious community-building, physical outputs, or seamless public accessibility, arguing that when cultural institutions demand that participatory art function as a sanitised engine of social inclusion or top-down cultural diplomacy, they strip the artwork of its vital capacity for antagonism, discomfort, and structural critique. Forcing an artistic process to become immediately visible and consumable serves the performative metrics of the funding apparatus, and reduces the radical practice to a comprehensible cultural commodity. To expand this critique into the reality of this article's case study, Bishop's framework must be synthesised with Jacques Rancière's (2004) theorization of the distribution of the sensible, positing that political domination operates by establishing a self-evident sensory order, dictating what is permitted to be seen, heard, and felt within a given space. The traditional national pavilion and the institutional gallery space are physical manifestations of this rigid distribution, as they pre-determine the conditions of viewing and staging cultural production as a passive, readable commodity for a consolidated public gaze. Therefore, when the festival in Lisbon refused to offer a pristine, centralised exhibition layout, it staged a radical dissensus, which Rancière defines as a rupture in our sensory fabric that recalibrates the relationship between making and seeing; thus, the lack of physical relics and the material absence noted in the retrospective reflections were not omissions, but active disruptions of the institutional sensory order. By confronting the urban visitor with sparsity, the project demanded a transformation from what Rancière (2009) calls the passive onlooker into an emancipated spectator, who is then forced to actively reconstruct, translate, and grapple with the radical untranslatability of the river journeys.

This aesthetic strategy of withdrawal finds its ultimate socio-political justification when viewed through Chantal Mouffe's model of agonistic pluralism. She insists that a genuine, democratic public sphere is never a site of the harmonious consensus that European Union political bodies often attempts to perform, but is rather a continuous, unreconciled arena of conflict where radical differences collide without mutating into violent antagonism. By prioritising chance, localised, and ephemeral encounters, the project refused to collapse their disparate geographical, ecological, and

cultural findings into a singular, cohesive European narrative, directly weaponizing Mirzoeff's concept of the right to look against the institutional traditional regime of visibility. Because traditional art history relies on stable, solid materials to document and exhibit national identity, the deliberate choice to abandon the production of permanent physical objects ensured that the knowledge generated remained continuous with the boundary-defying topography of the water itself. Consequently, the resulting 'diffusion' of the final festival across a fragmented network of mundane, non-institutional venues, including a neighbourhood middle school gym, a local library, a former football club, and an old palace in the city's outskirts, was a manifestation of Mouffe's agonistic space, for rather than hiding the internal contradictions, geopolitical frictions, and material gaps generated during the voyages under a polished curatorial veneer, the project allowed these tensions to exist and reveal themselves in all their unedulcorated form. By braiding the remnants of the river journeys into these peripheral, everyday spaces of civic life, the festival functioned as an unmonumental, scattered Third Space as theorized by Homi Bhabha (1994),[9] which represents an ambivalent, in-between locus where the rigid binaries of institutional authority and cultural containment are actively split and translated. This spatial displacement activates a form of cultural hybridity that resists the extractive logic of the institutional spectacle, and by refusing a centralised, monumental repository, it forces the audience to engage with a post-national Europe that is perpetually negotiated, incomplete, and fundamentally decentralised. Ultimately, Liquid Becomings demonstrates that a genuinely non-hierarchical, post-national imaginary of Europe cannot be housed within rigid confines nor validated by pre-approved standards. The empty spaces, missing archives, and silent rooms in Lisbon did not signify an absence of meaning, but functioned as battlegrounds of institutional friction, exposing the inherent impossibility of trying to capture, police, or civilise a community that exists purely in fluid relations.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

Restricted underlying data

The qualitative findings in this study rely on ethnographic and autoethnographic fieldnotes, first-person participation in Rotterdam and Lisbon, semi-structured interviews, and unpublished literary manuscripts. These materials cannot be deposited in an open repository due to the following ethical, legal, and privacy restrictions.

Qualitative interviews & off-the-record disclosures

Primary qualitative interviews and personal communications contain sensitive institutional disclosures, internal conflicts, and confidential opinions shared off the record. Informed consent was obtained on the condition of strict academic confidentiality and restricted use. Due to the highly specific context of the project, anonymisation is insufficient to prevent the identification of participants, and public disclosure would pose ethical risks to professional relationships.

Unpublished literary manuscripts

The literary works analysed were accessed under explicit non-disclosure agreements prior to formal commercial publication (scheduled for late 2026 by the author). Public deposit would violate copyright protections and publishing rights.

Conditions and route for data access

In accordance with ethical research standards, full datasets and raw transcripts cannot be made publicly available. De-identified excerpts or specific analytical queries regarding the field observations may be requested for academic verification purposes. Requests must be submitted in writing to the author at golisanoalice94@gmail.com. Access will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, subject to a signed non-disclosure agreement and verification that the requested material does not breach participant confidentiality or copyright restrictions.

Third-party data

This study references an internal, third-party ex-post evaluation report. Access to this document was granted directly to the author by the commissioning body, the European Cultural Foundation (ECF). The author does not hold copyright or redistribution rights for this third-party material. Researchers wishing to request access to this internal evaluation report

[9]Homi Bhabha unpacks this concept in *The Location of Culture*, where he introduces it as an invisible, contradictory 'split-space of enunciation'. Bhabha argues that all cultural statements are constructed within this ambivalent structure, which inherently 'destroys the mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code'. By replacing a stable 'cultural diversity' – which catalogued and contained differences within fixed colonial or national taxonomies – with an active 'cultural difference,' the Third Space opens up a liminal terrain. The transformational value of this site relies on the ongoing rearticulation and translation of elements that are 'neither the One.. nor the Other.. but something else besides', challenging the territorial authority of both.

must apply directly to the European Cultural Foundation. Inquiries and formal access requests should be directed to the ECF Secretariat at info@culturalfoundation.eu.

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