Maria Six-Hohenbalken

Negotiating and Representing Cultural Heritage: An Art Intervention in Kurdish Transnational Settings

Abstract

This paper proposes approaches to arts-based research designed to make transnational connections visible. It is an insight into a research project based on ethnographic documentation of Kurdish everyday cultures in Turkey. Starting from these collections, workshops with Kurdish transnational communities were held, using an arts-based research approach and participatory methods. These workshops addressed the transnationalization of Kurdish societies and memory and identity constructions, as well as historical narratives. This contribution describes the process of one of these arts-based workshops, in which possible forms of representation of Kurdish lifeworlds and transnational communities were developed. Finally, the added value of these theoretical and methodological approaches to migration research is discussed.

Keywords

Kurds, transnationalism, arts-based research, representation, cultural heritage

Aushandlung und Repräsentation von kulturellem Erbe. Eine künstlerische Intervention in kurdische transnationale Gemeinschaften

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag werden Ansätze kunstbasierter Forschung diskutiert, die darauf zielen, transnationale Verbindungen sichtbar zu machen. Er bietet Einblick in ein Forschungsprojekt, das auf ethnographischen Dokumentatio-

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Dr. Maria Six-Hohenbalken
Institute for Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna

nen kurdischer Alltagskulturen in der Türkei basiert. Ausgehend von diesen Sammlungen wurden Workshops mit kurdischen transnationalen Gemeinschaften durchgeführt, in denen die Transnationalisierung der kurdischen Gesellschaften thematisiert und Erinnerungs- und Identitätskonstruktionen sowie historische Narrative mit einem kunstbasierten Forschungsansatz und partizipativen Methoden untersucht wurden. Dieser Beitrag beschreibt den Prozess eines dieser kunstbasierten Workshops, in dem mögliche Repräsentationsformen der kurdischen Lebenswelten und transnationalen Gemeinschaften entwickelt wurden. Abschließend wird der Mehrwert dieser theoretischen und methodischen Ansätze für die Migrationsforschung diskutiert.

Schlagwörter

Kurd:innen, Transnationalismus, kunstbasierte Forschung, Repräsentation, kulturelles Erbe

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1 Introduction and Methodological Remarks

Kurds from various nation states in the Middle East have experienced tremendous socioeconomic transformations and political developments that have led to displacement and enormous rates of emigration. Due to the Kurds' long history of political violence, their situation is often seen as paradigmatic for transnationalization and de- as well as re-territorialization processes. In these processes, the impact of homeland policies, media, integration, and the orientations of future generations are important issues. Questions of the representation of transnational communities, (multiple) attachments, and how memories work in the context of mobility and migration require various theoretical and methodological approaches.

Planned underdevelopment, urbanization, war, and political persecution have initiated various migration and refugee movements over the last five decades. Kurdish migrations started in the late 19th century within the Middle East and from the 1960s onwards they expanded to Western Europe. These migrations encompassed young intellectuals, labor migrants (predominantly from Turkey), and refugees from Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria. Today, the Kurdish diasporic communities account between one and two million people with the largest numbers in the classical immigration states in Western Europe, namely Germany with around 660,000, France with 120,000, and the Netherlands with 80,000, to name just the largest ones (Eliassi 2021, p. 854). These established Kurdish diasporas are significant due to their political, social, and educational initiatives.

As the Kurdish transnational communities are highly heterogeneous, applying the term diaspora (in the singular) to encompass all these groups with their different linguistic competences, religious affiliations, and social backgrounds would be too homogenizing.[1] Kurds who live outside the Kurdish homelands in the Middle East have established various forms of exchange and networks that transcend national borders, although not all of these networks have taken the form of more or less close-knit »diasporic communities.«

More than two decades ago, scientists tried to grasp the dynamics of globally dispersed groups and communities based on ethnic, political, or religious bonds by elaborating on the concepts of diaspora and transnationalism (Vertovec and Cohen 1999). The conceptualization of transnational communities is based on the assumption that operating with rigid social science concepts is counterproductive for the study of the multidimensional orientations of migrants. The first major works pointed to the fact that »immigrants today build social fields that transcend geographical, cultural and political boundaries […] An essential element is the diversity of entanglements that transmigrants maintain in both the home and host societies« (Basch et al. 1994, p. 6). Steven Vertovec encouraged the study of the social morphology of transnational connections and the focus on multilocality, the fractured memories of diasporic consciousness, and the multiplicity of histories, communities, and selves (Vertovec 1999, p. 450). Even before that, James Clifford noted:

> »Whatever their ideologies of purity, diasporic cultural forms can never, in practice, be exclusively nationalist. They are deployed in transnational networks built from multiple attachments, and they encode practices of accommodation with, as well as resistance to, host countries and their norms. Diaspora […] involves dwelling, maintaining communities, having collective homes away from home […].« (Clifford 1994, p. 307f.)

In the Kurdish case, we are often dealing with very strongly developed diasporic organizations and also with a large number of transnational interdependencies. The two terms are not used interchangeably here but to describe either more close-knit communities or, more broadly, various forms of networks and interactions transcending national borders.

Can artwork and arts-based approaches capture these highly fluid and dynamic identity and memory processes and multiple histories? Can such approaches enable negotiations of representation in transnational realms?

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1 There is a plethora of work on Kurdish diasporas. Eliassi (2021, p. 855 f.) gives a precise overview of conceptual questions, various studies on different residence countries and diverse Kurdish transnational networks.

These have been two of the guiding questions of an arts-based research project called »ZOZAN—Investigations on Mobility through Multimedia Documentations, Art Interventions, Arts-Based Research and (Re)Presentations.«[2] ZOZAN is based on two comprehensive multimedia documentations on Kurdish everyday life and its transformations stretching between 1968 and 2015. Within these almost five decades, the artist Mehmet Emir and the social anthropologist Werner Finke produced photographic documentation (about 30,000 slides each), oral history recordings, and documentary films in the Kurdish-inhabited regions in Turkey. Both visual anthropological collections are rare documentations of Kurdish everyday culture and have not been published (but see Emir [2025]).[3] In the effort to make the collections accessible to a broader public, it is of great importance to link this research to the increasing transnationalization of Kurdish societies. ZOZAN has aimed at enabling the discussion and mediation of cultural heritage and memory, as well as the representation of multiple constructs of plural pasts through participatory arts-based workshops (PAWs). To meet the challenges of transnationalization, questions of belonging and (multiple) identities and of cultural heritage and memory should be negotiated in newly created discursive spaces. The interplay of a visual anthropological and an arts-based approach (Leavy 2018; Dogramaci and Mersman 2019) has proven to be productive for examining the transnational flows that are integral to the understanding of past and current mobilities and the narratives, memories, and representations associated with them.

These PAWs were organized with predominantly Kurdish artists and selected audiences in various Kurdish and European institutions, addressing people with different migration histories. In this way, highly fluid processes of identity, mobility, and memory constructions were captured. Topics such as past ways of life, cultural heritage, and current challenges of globalization were discussed and forms of representation for a broader public were produced. The workshops have been organized in various places in Austria, Germany, France, Turkey, and the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan in Iraq and have had varying durations, lasting from one weekend to five months. The results have been presented to the public in brochures, exhibitions, and finally in the form of a show.[4]

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2 The project team consists of Mehmet Emir, Eva Kolm, Maria Six-Hohenbalken, and Eva Stockinger, with the assistance of Eszter Ágota Hars and Marina Stoilova (FWF PEEK project AR 682).
3 The Werner Finke collection is archived at the Institute for Social Anthropology at the Austrian Academy of Sciences and will be available online from 2025 onwards. The Mehmet Emir collection is in private ownership.
4 See https://www.zozan.at. Accessed: 7.11.2024.

The workshops have raised a plethora of topics that are crucial for representing the transnationalization of the Kurds. Among them are individual and collective memories (often marked by violence, loss, and suppression): recent challenges in the Kurdish homelands causing migration, such as huge dam projects, gender-specific violence, exploitation in the workplace, the loss of cultural heritage, the epistemicide (destruction of knowledge systems), and the absence of institutions to preserve traditional knowledge and cultural heritage in the countries of origin. The produced artworks ranged from the artistic processing of the ethnographic photos to sculptural reworking of everyday objects in stone, audio recordings of individual memories, videos, reenactments of traditional practices such as butter production, as well as installations, literary editing, drawings, and paintings.

In the center were mainly artists of Kurdish descent and participants with Kurdish connections. Heterogeneous groups (related to age, gender, education, migration history) should guarantee further viewpoints on the materials and reflect the social world of the respective places where the workshops were organized. In the following, I will describe one of these workshops, which aimed at the creation of postage stamps for the Kurdish non-state nation.[5]

2 Lisl Ponger: Applying »Associative Research«

The first (pilot) workshop took place over two weekends in Vienna in May 2022 and was organized under the direction of the Viennese artist Lisl Ponger, who has extensive experience with participatory art projects. The group comprised twelve participants from all the nation states between which the Kurdish settlement area is divided (Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria), as well as from Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria. The participants included four men and eight women, who were between 25 and 65 years old, with two-thirds of them having Kurdish origins. All the participants had a history of migration and different lengths of stay in Austria, ranging from 3 to 40 years (one was a member of the second generation). A general invitation to attend was sent to various Kurdish diasporic associations and people with an affinity for art were contacted directly.[6] All participants had been active in the educational, social, and art sectors and had campaigned for Kurdish issues in

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5 Jacques Leruez used the term »stateless nation« in discussing the situation of Scotland (Verdugo and Milne 2016, p. 85). Later the term was applied for all ethnic groups without a sovereign state.

6 The Kurdish diaspora in Austria was estimated to be between 80,000 and 120,000 people (including successor generations, see Six-Hohenbalken 2013, p. 12). A large proportion of them live in Vienna and have established various political and cultural associations.

various projects. They had all dealt with Kurdish history, politics, and social life and thus had various forms of knowledge and experience in this field. However, the motives and reasons for their individual migrations were varied, ranging from labor migration to political exile. The common language for all participants was German, so the entire workshop was conducted in German. The workshop took place in a nonacademic environment in a neighborhood center in one of Vienna's best-known social housing buildings, the Goethehof.

The artist and director of the workshop, Lisl Ponger, has always devoted herself to burning sociopolitical issues.[7] After training at the Höhere Graphische Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt (Higher Graphics Teaching and Research Institute) in Vienna, she began filming during a three-year stay in Mexico (1974–78). Photographic work, the production of experimental films, and long journeys characterize her work. The examination of Vienna, a city that has always been characterized by migration and whose population composition has changed fundamentally in this regard since the 1960s, led Ponger to conduct the project »Fremdes Wien« (Foreign Vienna).[8] This work encompassed three years of field research, where she visited celebrations and festivals of »70 countries«, documenting them on film and in photos (Ponger, 1993). Ponger became known in the international art world through her invitation to »Documenta 11« in 2002. In recent years, she has been working with staged photography, characterized by intensive research and meticulous preparation. In her conception of a fictitious »Museum for Foreign and Familiar Cultures« (MuKul), as well as in international exhibitions and workshops, she conveys a critique of power and tackles racism, stereotyping, and exoticization.

The ZOZAN team opened the workshop with a presentation of the two collections of Finke and Emir and emphasized that the forms of representation are not specified by the team. Instead, Kurds should have the opportunity to develop representative forms themselves. Ponger then introduced some of her own projects and her working method and asked the participants to critically engage with both collections and to conduct »associative research.«

Methodologically, a number of survey techniques were used to document the workshop process. The ZOZAN team consisted of five social anthropologists and Mehmet Emir as an artist and photographer who is experienced with ethnographic approaches and made his own collection available for the project. The team members were present throughout the

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7 https://www.lislponger.com. Accessed: 1.7.2024.
8 For a general overview of migration to Vienna, see John and Lichtblau (1990). For the immigration of people from Turkey, see Gürses et al. (2004) and Şimşek (2017).

workshop and took on different roles. Besides an introduction to his collection, Emir acted as interpreter and documented the workshop via video and audio recordings. During the process, the team members saw themselves as facilitators (room and food preparation, technical support) and as participating observers taking notes. Two of the team members collaborated in the artistic process as observing participants. However, they did not attempt to intervene in the entire discussion and design process, which was carried out entirely by the workshop leader and the group. The team recorded discussions, took detailed field notes, and conducted semi-structured interviews with the artist Lisl Ponger as well as a reflective group interview after the workshop.

Ponger was very keen to create a group dynamic, in which everyone felt safe and comfortable. The creation of a sense of togetherness was fostered by eating together in an appealing environment. Some participants prepared Kurdish food, and one brought his musical instrument to give a short performance. These are processes of give and take, which have been described by Roger Sansi regarding similar arts-based projects: »Rather than showing works that discuss identity politics, they [comparable projects in social anthropology] enact specific social events and situations; from art practices that talked about stuff to people, to art that actually does stuff together with people« (Sansi 2015, p. 9).

The first workshop weekend was planned to crystallize topics and gather documentary knowledge about the Kurdish regions. Soon subjects like migration, war and resistance, environmental problems (oil deposits and water use), and changes in agriculture and livestock farming emerged. Personal memories, family biographies, and language problems were also addressed. Furthermore, the meaning of documenting the cultural heritage of a non-state nation, for which there are hardly any archives or museums in the regions of origin, was discussed, and the existence of corresponding collections of Kurdish culture in Europe was critically debated.[9] The participants noted that in the presentation of Emir's and Finke's collections, the historicity of the images and the particularities of the specific ways of life (livestock farming, transhumance, subsistence economy) must be pointed out so as not to convey a false impression of the Kurdish culture. They also stressed that the images must be contextualized within global changes in peasant structures. Furthermore, the participants debated the role of the ethnographer Finke and the unequal power relations between researchers and research subjects.

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9 Museums such as the MARKK (Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt) in Hamburg and the Ethnological Museum in Berlin have ethnographic objects from Kurdish-inhabited areas of the Middle East in their collections.

The participants also presented their own or their family's migration stories, ranging from labor migration (through recruitment) to educational migration and flight from state repression in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey or the recent war in Syria. Ponger used an associative research approach[10] and encouraged the participants to present their knowledge and personal experience of superregional and global influences on the Kurdish regions. They were asked to share memories of upheavals and refuge, changes in traditional social structures, and their migration experiences. The participants discussed in detail structural problems resulting from geopolitical interests: the region's oil wealth, the water problem (which is largely caused by dam construction), the availability of natural resources being extracted by state authorities without consideration, the structural inequality and dependency, and the forced migration. Recent violence against the population due to the international arms trade and the use of modern war technologies such as drones were explained by using specific examples from the participants' regions of origin.

The various forms of suppression of Kurdish culture and identity, bans, and persecutions were discussed in various facets. Workshop participants who have been active in initiatives for language preservation stimulated the discussion on Kurdish language, e.g. the preservation, the standardization (Kurmancî and/or Soranî), and the possibility of publishing in Kurdish (Mülayim 2018). Artistic realizations of individual and collective experiences of violence in literature, visual arts, and music were introduced in the discussion as well.

Ponger came up with the idea of designing postage stamps that, on the one hand, could draw on the existing collections of Finke and Emir and, on the other hand, also depict the discussed themes of migration, memory, and various transformation processes. The Austrian Post allows individuals to create their own stamps, usable for normal postal traffic. The group selected photographs from both collections, representing the topics discussed. In several steps, four stamp sheets (20 stamps each) were designed—one stamp sheet each was based on the Finke and Emir collections in addition to two sheets that symbolized the transformation processes of recent decades in the Kurdish regions (urbanization, destruction of rural structures, memories of mass violence). The group determined the final selection and arrangement of the photos mainly attuned to aesthetic considerations.

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10 Ponger's approach is related to what is defined as an Intrinsic Arts-Based Research, which relates also to psychoanalytical concepts. Psychologists such as Gerber et al. (2018) explain more on this methodological approach in creative arts therapies, thus »to identify and describe the arts-based intersubjective processes that contribute to self/other awareness and narratives, metaphoric expression, insight« (p. 1).
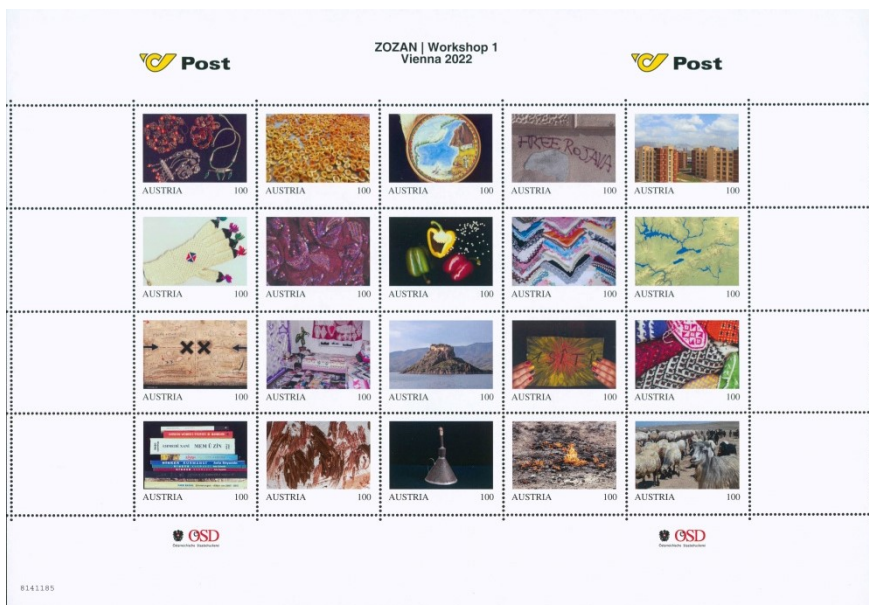
Figs. 1–2: Images of stamp sheets 1 and 2.
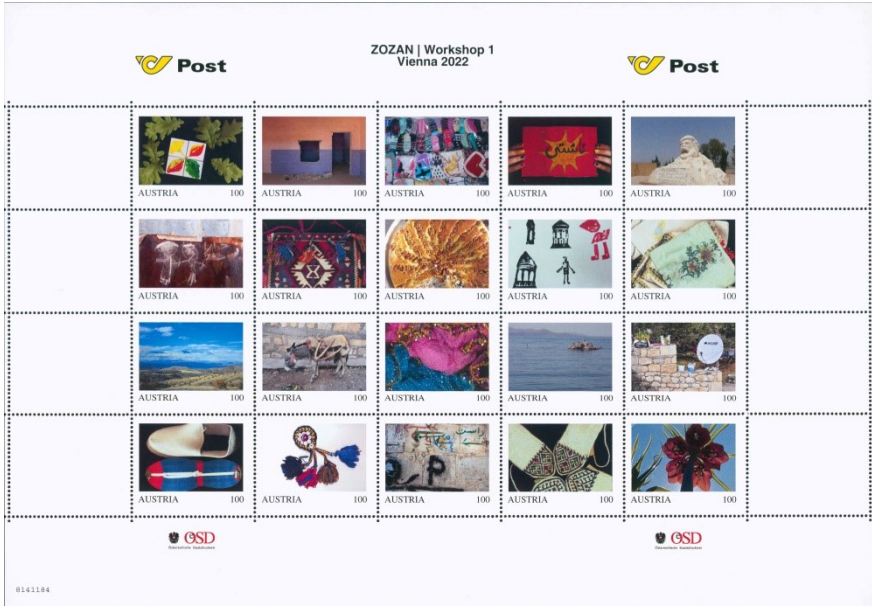
Figs. 3–4: Images of stamp sheets 3 and 4.

The images of the first stamp sheet, »Werner Finke«, refer to the mountainous regions in the core of the Kurdish settlement area. The work of the cattle breeders in the summer pastures and farming activities in the village were depicted, as well as social life (Fig. 1). One workshop participant summarized the considerations in the selection process very succinctly:

> »The Zozan topic [traditional livestock breeding and alpine farming] is a village theme. In the city, life worked differently in those years too. […] Many of these images come from rural areas. People lived differently in the city. […] The clothes are different, the food, the tables, how you eat, how you play, it's all much more modern.«

The production of the second stamp sheet, »Zımeq 1983–2019«, followed the gaze of photographer Emir, who documented his village and his own community of origin during annual summer sojourns (Fig. 2). It is the story of a village in which the subsistence economy was dissolved within a few decades and which is now just a summer village due to high emigration rates.[11] Zımeq has thus become a »global village« whose inhabitants live scattered across many European countries and only come together in the summer. Emir had made a preselection of his photos available to the group, who discussed them and implemented them artistically. The specific assignment of the individual pictures was based primarily on aesthetic considerations, so that not only the single stamps but the whole stamp sheet functions as an overall work of art.

In the next two stamp sheets, the participants selected photos that symbolize or refer to the region's raw material problems (oil production, dam projects), extreme experiences of violence (genocide memorials, destroyed houses), and the language problem (Figs. 3–4). New visual materials, such as paintings, were developed in the workshop to depict recent transformation processes in the Kurdish regions, as well as individual experiences. The participants brought photos and memorabilia (jewelry, textiles) from their private collections and produced images on site. Participants also referred to the representation of Kurds in Viennese public space in the form of graffiti that related to the war-torn situation in Rojava, the self-governing region of Northern Syria with a multiethnic population that includes Kurds, Arabs, and Assyrians. The group painted two pictures with the inscription »Peace« (*Aşîtî*) in Kurmancî and Soranî to draw attention to the ongoing violence.

One young participant commented on ambivalences in the selection of materials:

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11 For the general transformation of economies and demography in Turkish villages, see Öztürk et al. (2018), for the visual documentation, see Emir [2025].

»[…] it just shows that it is the diaspora memory. […] It doesn't reflect the Kurdish youth who live there today. There is [also] Kurdish rap, for example. […]. If I now add a gold chain, that is, of course, traditional. But, of course, that also has something to do with the diaspora, which has somehow got stuck in the past or that people naturally remember back with a certain nostalgia […]. But it's also this mobility, where there is this decision, What do I take with me from home? What is worth something to me? And then maybe it's not a rap album that came out two years ago, but maybe it's the jewelry or the fabric.«

It was important to all participants to contextualize the motifs so as not to convey a one-sided and simplified impression of Kurdish everyday culture. If the stamp sheets were to be presented in an exhibition or in a publication, it was particularly important to the group to present the images in the context of their historicity and to refer to urban cultures of Kurdish life alongside the rural life documented by Emir and Finke.

3 Notes on the Methodical Implementation

Although the group was relatively diverse in its composition, the participants critically remarked on the higher average age and gender imbalance. Younger people from the Kurdish communities might have been promoting the youth culture more. With more women than men taking part, it was also suggested that a more even gender balance would be advisable, with Ponger arguing that cultural work is always dominated by women.

The workshop process enabled a different form of engagement with Kurdish issues that is not comparable to other initiatives in the Kurdish diasporic communities, some participants remarked. What cultural and political events in the Kurdish diaspora have in common is that many discussions follow (trans)national narratives, established by the political organizations, which have different emphases depending on the Kurds' country of origin. Kurdish diasporic organizations are highly politicized, both in terms of party politics and the overall politics for the Kurdish regions of origin. What unites them is the reference to diverse experiences of violence and marginalization. The narratives are often related to political suppression in the respective nation state from which they have migrated and differ, for example, with regard to religion-specific oppression (Eliassi 2021).

A general criticism raised by the younger generation has been that diasporic events are often repetitive, related to politicized diaspora narratives, and offering few opportunities for new topics and discussions.[12] The workshop format did not evoke these narratives and offered more scope for com-

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12 See, for example, the study of Vera Eccarius-Kelly (2015) and her outlines of the general state of research of multiple generations in Kurdish diasporic narratives (p. 186).

parative presentation and the contribution of personal experiences and emotions. It was the comprehensive knowledge of the participants (partly due to their academic studies on Kurdish topics) and the resulting group dynamics that particularly appealed to the artist.

As the participants were experts on one or the other Kurdish topic, knowledge was jointly narrated, explained, and negotiated. The workshop was in the form of a joint production, or rather presentation, of knowledge in a very associative and discursive way. This form of associative knowledge production meant that it was not only individual knowledge that was presented and discussed. It was placed in relation to personal experiences and the respective contexts of origin.

For some Kurdish participants, the historical photographs triggered a series of memories, as they »relived« past times and found ample opportunities to share these memories and emotions. This evoked a new perspective and a new understanding of the collection of photos on display among all the participants. In the course of engaging with the two collections, participants gained an insight into past Kurdish ways of life with which, for various reasons, they had no contact in their own contexts of origin. They were thus confronted with other forms of »being Kurdish«, from which they learned both from the collections and from the personal experiences and memories of the other participants.

The group dynamics were not foreseeable, which was exciting and challenging for the artist because she had to react spontaneously to initiate a coherent process. The non-Kurdish participants also contributed reflections and comparisons from their own societies and migratory experiences. For example, when discussing family structures, one person from the southernmost Austrian province raised the question of inheritance rules. In her home region, she argued, these are characterized by gender-specific inequality, as it is almost exclusively the male descendants who inherit. In Kurdistan, on the other hand, the participants were able to identify a range of possible inheritance rules, some of which are not as misogynistic as in some Austrian regions. Such discussions and comparisons enabled a new view of the »own« and thus also made it possible to counteract a view of »othering.«

All participants were enthusiastic about the artist's suggestion to bring along objects and pictures relating to the topics discussed. This approach of active involvement, addressing the participants as experts and introducing personal objects (items taken from home visits, family memorabilia, photos, own publications), and the power over their form of representation was new and attractive. One participant brought acrylic colors with him to work artistically on site. Besides the knowledge exchange and negotiation, the artistic work was a further learning process, as participants got the feeling of being

able to work artistically. The implementation gave rise to a group dynamic characterized by a sense of belonging, mutual appreciation, and negotiation processes.

Critical considerations arose around classic Kurdish (national) motifs or images of politicians or well-known artists who were previously deceased. The representational form of stamps, which is a medium of national symbolism, was thus discussed. The possibility of, on the one hand, designing stamps for a stateless nation and, on the other hand, not following national motifs and symbolic traditions but emphasizing personal experiences, was an interesting point of discussion. In some stamps, however, national or typical Kurdish symbols were used, such as the Kurdish national colors or images of traditional Kurdish clothes. In their ambiguity, the produced stamps symbolize the transnational reality of a stateless nation.

The role of the artist, who had made several decisions in the selection process (almost exclusively in relation to the technical requirements for reproducibility of the photos), was seen as particularly positive by the participants. Linked to this, the mixture of content-related discussion and the artist's desire to complete a joint work of art within the given time frame was also highly appreciated. One participant stressed that the group dynamic was characterized by a very human, friendly, and collegial atmosphere without any major disputes.

Finally, the effectiveness of the stamp sheets was scrutinized. It was considered whether the selected images only »work« as a total work of art—i.e., as a representational element on the four stamp sheets—or whether the individual stamps also allow this to be the case. The participants pointed to the danger that individual images could fixate on the past and thus have an undesired effect—a danger that should be reflected on in publications and exhibitions.

4 Conclusion and Final Reflections

What do participatory arts-based approaches, such as those presented in this workshop, contribute to migration research that is usually based on qualitative or quantitative methods? What added value do these approaches offer for gaining knowledge on migration and diaspora phenomena?

The combination of ethnographic and arts-based approaches, the collaboration of social scientists, artists, and participants can »create a ›potential space‹ full of transformative possibilities« as Maggie O'Neill and Phil Hubbard (2010) outline. In connection, for example, with biographical methods, this allows one to create »multi-vocal, dialogic texts which make visible emotional structures and inner experiences as sensuous knowledge« (O'Neill and

Hubbard 2010, p. 47). Ala Rabiha Alhourani who followed a performative ethnographic approach with Somali participants in Cape Town, South Africa, highlights the potential for elaborating on diversity and multiple connections, tracing the politics of cultural difference and experiencing human sameness. This allows us to move »beyond the limitations of an informative ethnography« and to break hierarchical power relations in the research process (Alhourani 2017, p. 213). Crucial herein are the group processes in which people are connected, reveal their thoughts and feelings (Alhourani 2017, p. 214), and enable a »sensuous way of knowing« as Dwight Conquergood (1991, p. 180) and Sarah Pink (1990) have also stressed in their conceptual approaches of a sensory ethnography (quoted in Alhourani 2017, p. 216).

The forms of knowledge and negotiation that come to the fore are not primarily rational and/or cognitive but allow a sensuous understanding. The process in the PAWs consisted not only in the sharing and expressing of memories but also in the revelation of unconscious or suppressed memories. Similar research endeavors have highlighted the performative character of such approaches, which can establish common *senses of belonging* in a new environment and contribute to homemaking processes. Neither the artists nor the participants were asked to address personal feelings or emotions in the workshops. This focus developed by itself, so that personal connections, own experiences of migration, and the emotional level were particularly emphasized. It was precisely these emotional approaches and reactions to the material that strengthened the group dynamics and shaped the outcomes.

In her study on migrant objects, Susannah Radstone (2020) has explored the various levels of mnemonic connections to such objects. Objects linked to former and adopted homes are often related to memory processes that cannot be fully controlled. Memory processes herein are »responsive«, »unrestrainable«, and »ungovernable« and reveal opaque layers and unpredictable pathways (Radstone 2020, p. 16). Working with objects allows us to reestablish connections, to redefine belonging, and to *translate* meanings and knowledge into new lifeworlds. In the past decade, museums in Europe have increasingly begun to develop participatory strategies for presenting migration history in order »to ask new questions about existing collections or develop new perspectives« (NEMO 2015, p. 16). Participatory approaches can foster a critical engagement with colonial pasts and show new pathways for museums as intermediaries for social inclusion, Sarah Linn and her colleagues argue (Linn et al. 2024).

The work with personal objects and images in our PAWs enabled the sharing of highly emotional memories and allowed an empathic understanding of violent experiences, dispossession, and loss. Lydia Nakashima Degarrod (2016), who has worked on empathy in arts-based projects with

exiled persons, points out that this »act of emotional and imaginative engagement has also been called resonance, an emotional and imaginative engagement« that is beyond words« (p. 328). In mediated safe spaces, arts-based approaches can support people in their empowerment and resilience, while acknowledging multilayered, symbolic, and intuitive understandings of the world and inspire imaginations (Toll 2018, p. 11; see also Leavy 2015, p. 173).

As the reasons for Kurdish migrations are highly political, people in Kurdish diasporic communities and transnational settings constantly relate to and identify and engage with politics at home. The presentation of the multimedia collections, which focus almost exclusively on the lifeworlds of Kurds in Turkey, and the composition of the group with Kurds from Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria allowed a discussion of similarities and differences, regarding, for example, political developments and individual socialization, in the four countries of origin. The arts-based methods allowed political discussions, but they transgressed the common political narratives and enabled others to share individual memories and experiences and connect them to the existing historiography and narratives. The participants critically examined the focus of both collections on rural and everyday life. Finke's collection ended in the year 2000, while the Emir collection lasts until today (with a focus on Dêrsim/Tunceli), but neither collection refers to the diasporic connectedness. The aim of the workshops was to capture Kurdish experiences of migration in order to elaborate on a representation of these Kurdish transnational realities. It became clear how heterogeneous identity constructions and multiple pasts can even exist within the same diasporic community. Not elements of an imagined nation state, but individual memories of and ties to the homeland, as well as multiple identity references, were discussed from the perspective of a diasporic existence.

Despite the emphasis on individual experiences and different anchors, affiliations, and attachments and despite the different sociodemographic references (urban/rural, age, generation), commonalities of »being Kurdish« crystallized during the workshop. Beyond a discourse of victimization, references to experiences of discrimination, an emphasis on agency, and the recognition of diverse cultural, political, and linguistic socialisations came to light in many workshops.[13] The knowledge of these differences, the historical and political backgrounds, as well as the diverse experiences of migration

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13 Artists involved in the workshops of the ZOZAN project: Halgurd Ahmad, Sabah Ahmed, Hoshang Bahjat, Friedrich Becke, Savaş Boyraz, Songül Boyraz, DARO, Ezgi Erol, Pavlos Fysakis, Thomas Freiler, Karzan A. Jan, Dila Kaplan, Zeynep Kaplan, Melis Kaya, Jonas Nieft, Srusht Omer, Duygu Örs, Lisl Ponger, Layla Qadir & Kosar Mageed, Niga Salam, Nora Severios, Rojda Tuğrul, Irene Wallner, Ruth Weissmann.

require multifaceted approaches of representing this non-state nation that goes far beyond a classic form of national identity construction.

Besides making these experiences and multiple entanglements visible, arts-based approaches have further methodological facets that require particular emphasis. Especially the participatory arts-based approaches can help to soften the unequal power structure between researchers and researched. Regarding the temporal and spatial dimension of migration experiences, such approaches leave many directions open that might not be captured by a narrative or semi-standardized interview or by questionnaires. Fractured memories and the reference to multiple pasts can be made visible. Finally, arts-based approaches are also suitable for an exploratory phase in research processes, where the aim is to outline a field and formulate detailed research questions. They do not allow for a representative portrayal of an entire diasporic group but can be used to gain insights into the diverse dimensions of identity and memory processes.

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