

## Article

# Nomadic Sensibility: Materiality and the Politics of Shelter in Merz and Kato's Artistic Practices

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**Abstract:** This article examines nomadism through the conceptual framework of philosopher Rosi Braidotti, analyzing its implications for contemporary artistic practices. By focusing on case studies, including Italian artist Mario Merz's igloos and Peruvian artist Jimena Kato's perilous constructions, this article explores material precariousness and material agency as a means of engaging politically with topics such as migration, diasporic cultures, and the contested notion of home. It seeks to elucidate the dynamic interplay between balance and imbalance, revealing the transformative essence of being. Central to this discussion are three key concepts drawn from Braidotti's work: (1) the nomadic subject, (2) performativity, and (3) potentiality. These categories are crucial for understanding how nomadism, as both a theoretical and practical approach, redefines subjectivity and materiality in art. The analysis suggests that these artistic practices embody a nomadic ontology, where movement and instability become generative forces for creation, challenging traditional notions of fixed identity and static form. The article contributes to the ongoing discourse concerning the intersection of philosophy and contemporary art, proposing that nomadism offers a valuable lens through which to view the evolving relationship between the artist, their materials, and the broader socio-cultural context.

**Keywords:** contemporary art; nomadism; materiality; liminal; Braidotti; Baker; artistic practices; sheltering; precarious; Kato; Merz



Academic Editor: Andrew M. Nedd

Received: 14 September 2024

Revised: 7 December 2024

Accepted: 9 December 2024

Published: 2 January 2025

**Citation:** Angoso de Guzmán, Diana. 2025. Nomadic Sensibility: Materiality and the Politics of Shelter in Merz and Kato's Artistic Practices. *Arts* 14: 4. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts14010004>

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## 1. Introduction

For more than three decades, curatorial discourses and art historical essays have explored the very contemporary concept of nomadism as a global, post-colonial condition to the point of becoming a trope. Central to the debate are issues such as the emergence of a transnational, hybrid, and mixed culture, the cultural rhetoric of “othering” and the challenging balance between the global and the local. During the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, globalization and multiculturalism dominated the artistic scene, though exhibitions such as *The Global Contemporary Art Worlds After 1989* (ZKM-Karlsruhe), which focused on overcoming the opposition between center and periphery to give way to a new artistic scenario: ‘artistic worlds’ (Belting et al. 2013).

However, the ideology of postmodern identity, which initially invigorated these discussions, soon began to show signs of fatigue. On one hand, the established notion of the global village and decentralization in the art world was systematically deconstructed, while on the other, these narratives were fragmented under the broader framework of multiculturalism. Postcolonial criticism has been particularly effective in deconstructing the “whitened” version of the global nomad—a privilege for some and a necessity for others. Scholars such as García Canclini and Alvarez (2003) and Bhabha (1994), as well as Guasch (2016), Arnaldo and Fernández del Campo (2012), and Mosquera (2003, 2010, 2020)

in the arts, soon raised their voices to challenge it as a new form of colonization; this was in order to avoid an uncritical celebration of movement and change that only considers the privileged perspective of a few, thus contributing significantly to a counter-narrative.

In recent years, migration and nomadism have become more prominent than ever, with entire populations forcibly displaced by political and economic crises, living in persistently precarious conditions. The theoretical issues surrounding these phenomena are further exacerbated by the alarming rise of increasingly restrictive migration policies in the West. This study explores these issues through an analysis of works by two artists from different generations: Mario Merz (Turin, 1925–2003) and his iconic igloos, and the precarious constructions created by Jimena Kato (Lima, 1979). The choice to focus on Jimena Kato, rather than on other widely studied artists such as Colombian Doris Salcedo—whose installations also engage the viewer kinesthetically—allows for the exploration of new categories and alternative cartographies. Kato's Peruvian nationality is enriched by her Japanese heritage, enabling a unique intersection of cultural influences that broadens the scope of this investigation.

#### *Methodological Approach: Materials and Artist' Words*

The first question that arises is as follows: how can precarity, migration, and dwelling be conveyed through art? More specifically, how can complex concepts be expressed without relying on words? In addressing these questions, I have chosen to work with the language of materials rather than the language of words or images. This material-based approach situates my work within the tradition and genealogy of material culture, as well as within a framework informed by positive materialist philosophy, drawing on the theories of Rosi Braidotti and the notion of *embodied materiality*.

By *embodied materiality*, I refer to the dialogue with materials that implicitly critiques logocentrism and the dominance of written language. In the Western tradition, heavily influenced by Neoplatonism and Kantian philosophy, form has traditionally been prioritized over matter. However, since the 1990s, scholarship that seeks to center matter in research has emerged, particularly within art history (e.g., Krauss and Bois 1997).

Lange-Berndt, for example, proposes engaging in “a methodology of material complicity” and poses the following question: “What does it mean to give agency to the material, to follow the material, and to act with the material?” (Lange-Berndt 2015, p. 3). While there is a growing acceptance of the immanent and the processual—elements more closely aligned with our own interests—most of these studies originate from other disciplines. These include seemingly distant fields, such as Karen Barad's quantum physics and materialist onto-epistemology (Barad 2007), Ingold's anthropology of material in motion and meshworks (Ingold 2007), and, as previously mentioned, Rosi Braidotti's theoretical work (Braidotti 1994, 2004, 2019).

This article is situated within this context, namely within materialist thought, understood as a continuation of the French school of philosophical materialism (Bachelard 1942; Simondon 1958) and, more specifically, within the framework of so-called New Materialism (Coole and Frost 2010). These studies share a turn toward the material, toward the processual, and toward the agency of materials without anthropomorphizing them. The material itself remains an under-investigated category.

Secondly, by examining the concepts outlined so far—materials and artists' words—I focus on two primary sources prioritizing qualitative and experiential research methods, including artist interviews, firsthand observation of artworks, and direct experiential analysis, over purely cognitive and theoretical approaches or representational and symbolic methods. In the case of Peruvian artist Jimena Kato Murakami, an in-depth qualitative interview was conducted in her studio, along with a detailed analysis to ensure a profound

understanding of her work. For Mario Merz, published interviews between the artist and his trusted art critic, Germano Celant, were consulted, complemented by a direct observation and analysis of his works during the exhibition *Mario Merz: El tiempo es mudo* [*Mario Merz: Time is mute*, Reina Sofía Museum), 2019–2020.

It is essential to acknowledge the extensive body of literature concerning artist interviews, which includes contributions from art criticism, art history, and specialized journalism. In addition to print-published conversations between artists and critics, audio and video recordings have become increasingly common. Until recently, artist interviews primarily focused on the interpretation of artworks and the artist's biography. However, since the 1990s, a new category has emerged: artist interviews as a resource for conservation and restoration (Mancusi-Ungaro 1999).

This practice has since become institutionalized in museums, driven by the increasing complexity of the works being acquired. Beyond the information provided by acquisition contracts, instruction manuals, or standardized questionnaires completed by the artist or their assistants, recorded interviews are now included in the archival documentation that accompanies the work. These interviews aim to safeguard what is considered most significant in contemporary art: the artist's intent.

Initiatives such as the Artists' Documentation Program, established in 1990 by Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, and subsequent efforts like INCCA (International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art) and VoCA (Voices of Contemporary Art) in North America underscore the importance of this methodology. These international platforms emphasize the need to document "living artists" as an indispensable component of conservation professionals' practices. This methodology has also proven valuable for art history research, particularly when supplemented by the direct study of artworks and their materials.

The complexity of conducting artist interviews has facilitated interdisciplinary connections with related fields such as sociology, anthropology, and ethnography, alongside the core disciplines of our domain: art history, conservation–restoration, and fine arts. Within the social sciences, there is a well-established tradition of qualitative interviewing, with sociology contributing to the analysis of variables. In his ethnographic study of conservation practices at MoMA, sociologist Dominguez-Rubio raises a critical question: to what extent can the truthfulness of artists' statements be trusted? (Dominguez-Rubio 2020, p. 127). According to Dominguez-Rubio, it is possible that artists may not always recall events accurately, may not convey the truth, or that their discourse may not provide meaningful information. After all, an artist's primary mode of expression is not verbal language but material forms.

For this reason, this article is grounded in two primary sources: interviews with artists and the artworks themselves, with a particular emphasis on the materials. As noted earlier, materials are a relatively under-investigated category.

## 2. Merz and Nomadic Sensibility

### 2.1. *Dwelling and Mario Merz*

Among contemporary artists who have effectively explored the notion of shelter and precarity through *embodied materiality*—whether in refugee camps, Romani settlements, or other forms of temporary housing—a significant historical precedent can be found in the work of Mario Merz, a European artist from the second half of the twentieth century.

The politically engaged artist Mario Merz (Turin, 1925–2003) evokes the poetics of nomadism through his igloo constructions, which serve as an archaic critique of modernity. Initiated in 1968, Merz's igloos span the decades of his artistic production, maintaining a consistent semi-spherical form despite the diversity of materials employed. Their appearance evokes a mythical, pre-industrial dwelling, as interpreted by critics such as Harald

Szeemann, who described them as “the refuge, the primary, the first house (. . .), the shell, the carapace” (Szeemann 1995, p. 128, as cited in Pallasmaa 2019, p. 44). More recently, Pallasmaa reflects on how the materialist architect Gottfried Semper observed that early dwellings were not governed by tectonic principles but were instead fragile structures woven from branches, twigs, and plant fibers. “Because dwelling is not only a physical shelter”, Pallasmaa writes, “it is the definition of the inhabitant’s place in the world” (Pallasmaa 2019, p. 25).

However, despite the prominent notion of dwelling in Merz’s work, his igloos are not truly habitable. Of the more than thirty igloos constructed over four decades, only two are capable of accommodating a human being. These include *Lo spazio è curvo o retto* (*Space is curved or straight*) 1973, (Figure 1), where the artist and a poet performed a live piece, and *La Tenda di Gheddafi* (*Ghaddafi’s Tent*) 1981, made of fabric. The remaining igloos are impenetrable, as they lack an entrance, rendering them unsuitable as shelters or places of protection. According to Merz himself:

I assert that the igloo is uninhabitable and that this easily leads to the idea that the igloo has a deeper relationship with people. From my experience, I observe that people appreciate it because they immediately understand its real and cosmological vocation. (Merz; Celant 1979, p. 5)



**Figure 1.** Mario Merz, *Lo spazio è curvo o retto*, 1973, Collezione Merz. Merz installing the igloo at Berlin Kunstmesse. (©Mario Merz, VEGAP, Madrid 2024).

In their closed forms, Merz’s igloos function in externality, serving as visual representations of a semi-sphere—a symbol of the earth, akin to Merz’s concept of the skull. In the artist’s words:

The igloo is the ideal organic form. It is both a world and a small house. What interests me about the igloo is that it exists in the mind before being realized in practice; an organic idea is not truly organic until it is realized. Then comes the challenge of organizing a structure as simply as possible. Architecture is a construction for shelter, to give the human being a complete dimension. . . The igloo is a synthesis, a complex image, as I am haunted by the elemental image of an igloo that I carry within. (Merz; Celant 1989, p. 26)

In its aesthetic dimension, the concept remains dominant and constant, while the materials vary according to the availability of the surrounding environment. Some materials are opaque (clay, mud, stones, concrete), while others evoke the lightness and fluidity of transparency (glass, metal rods, metal meshes). As Florence de Méredieu highlights, the history of matter is fundamentally tied to its opacity. Defined as a substance with texture and resistance—perceptible to both sight and touch—matter is primarily characterized by its thickness. In this context, it functions as an obstacle, a surface, or a solid entity that resists

visual penetration. Historically, the earliest materials used in art were selected precisely for their weight, density, and physical presence. Painting and sculpture, for instance, have traditionally relied on opaque substances such as wood, marble, pigments, and powders, which serve to either cover or extend across a surface (Mérédieu [1994] 2011, p. 57).

When Merz chooses opaque materials, he references the origins of construction and artistic language. In contrast, his incorporation of lighter, transparent materials, such as glass or light, symbolizes modernity—a reflection of the birth of modern art itself.

Opacity and transparency, however, are not isolated concepts. These elements exist on a spectrum with multiple variations and layers. The idealized notion of pure transparency, for example, aligns with emptiness or nothingness, while translucence (or diaphaneity) allows light to filter through without revealing any discernible image in the background. Opalescence, on the other hand, preserves only the aura or vibration of light, creating a state of ethereal ambiguity (Mérédieu [1994] 2011, p. 58) (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Mario Merz, *Igloo at the Palacio de las Alhajas*, 1982. Metal, glass quartz, slate stone, stone sand and heather branches. 250 × 500 × 500. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. (© Mario Merz, VEGAP, Madrid, 2024).

Merz's approach to materials reflects his philosophy of working with what is immediately available. He explains:

I work with what I find. For example, if I find broken glass, I think it's fantastic to place a piece of broken glass on another piece of glass to make an igloo. And when I find iron mesh, I place the iron mesh on the igloo, and that's it. And when I had to use earth, I made [an igloo] out of earth, and it was interesting to make an igloo out of earth. (quoted in Celant 1979, p. 56)

The Italian critic Germano Celant, through his numerous writings and interviews with Mario Merz, develops the concept of the artist as a nomad, drawing parallels between Merz's creative process and the construction methods of nomads. Celant writes, "He resembles a nomad who coordinates the location of his camps to exploit the territory in search of economic resources and cultural stimuli" (Celant 1979, p. 53).

The phenomenon of the artist as a cultural nomad has been analyzed from both sociological and artistic perspectives in recent scholarship. For instance, in *Life Between Borders* (Gielen 2013), Pascal Gielen explores the "aestheticization of the nomadic existence" and identifies the contemporary artist as a cultural nomad—a new flâneur—who moves across cities and continents, from residency to residency, participating in biennials, international exhibitions, and Documentas. However, in Merz's work, the nomad serves as a metaphor for archaic times, and his chosen language is the materials through which communication occurs most directly.

Merz's materials are as adaptable as those of a nomad. Clamps and arches can hold glass plates or mats, secure skins and bundles of branches, and accommodate large slabs

or stones and car doors. Everything is reduced to the enigma and the nomadic energy (Celant 1979, p. 53). In contrast to tectonic constructions, these igloos lack a stable structure, giving them an inherent instability that evokes a sense of vertigo, as if they could collapse at any moment. The internal tension between balance and imbalance complements the tension between exteriority and interiority. The previously mentioned impenetrability is nuanced by the transparency of glass in some igloos, giving them a visually open character, even if they are not practically accessible. Even in those igloos where opaque materials like earth and clay dominate—such as *Objet-Cache-toi*, *Iglú de Giap* (Figure 3) and *Ché Fare*, all constructed in 1968—the artist adds neon elements with the intention of destroying, dematerializing, and deconstructing. In Merz's own words, neon allows him to “hide the object, that is, to plastically erase it, to nullify it” (Merz; Celant 1979, p. 54).

As Mangini (2016) recently argued, Merz was a politically engaged artist whose early anti-fascist activities in the 1940s led to his imprisonment, making it appropriate to view his work as attentive to the political and social issues of his time. However, Merz's context and political intentions have been diluted in later writings by scholars such as Harald Szeemann (1990), who described him as a “wandering and solitary visionary”, and Danilo Eccher (1995), who characterized him as a “libertarian individualist”—an interpretation more aligned with globalization and economic neoliberalism. Mangini points out that even Celant transformed the figure of Merz, portraying him as a politically committed guerrilla in his early writings but later as a “bohemian nomad” without roots or commitments.



**Figure 3.** Mario Merz, *Iglú de Giap*, 1968, Collezione Merz. Metal structure, bags of soil, neon, battery, and accumulators. (120 × 200 cm), installation view, Deposito d'Arte Presente, Turin, 1968 (© Mario Merz, VEGAP, Madrid, 2024).

Is Merz a libertarian individualist, as Eccher claims, a shaman, a mystic, an individual mythologizer in the sense of Szeemann, or a guerrilla/nomad as understood by Celant? In the debate between viewing Merz as a libertarian individualist and as an artist attentive to situated political knowledge, the latter perspective seems more compelling. Nearly two decades separate Celant's writings (Celant 1979) from Eccher's (1995), spanning the transition from Fordist capitalism to advanced capitalism, or, to paraphrase sociologist Zygmunt Bauman ([2000] 2009), from solid modernity to liquid modernity.

In this study, I align with Mangini's argument, alongside other recent studies (e.g., Pallasmaa 2019), in asserting that, within the tension between the individual and the collective, Merz's work prioritizes the collective through two critical elements.

First, contrary to the notion of the individualistic nomad, it is important to emphasize that the igloos are not autobiographical, despite their latent anthropocentrism. Typically, they measure approximately two meters in diameter and one meter in height, dimensions corresponding to the length of a human body lying down and its height while sitting. Secondly, beyond this anthropocentric reference, the archaic forms of the igloos evoke hunter-gatherer societies; these are collective communities characterized, as prehistorian

Almudena [Hernando \(2012\)](#) notes, by a high level of interdependence among individuals, society, and the environment.

By invoking archaic times, Merz presents a profound critique of contemporary society—specifically, the 1960s and 1970s—targeting modernity, extractive capitalism, consumerism, and, ultimately, alienated forms of life. Hernando argues that “an egalitarian hunter–gatherer society does not merely imply a form of socio-economic organization, but also a particular shaping of its members’ subjectivities” ([Hernando 2012](#), p. 22). According to her, such hunter–gatherer societies fostered highly cooperative and cohesive human groups, where subjectivity was relationally constructed through a dynamic process of producing and becoming.

Due to his committed anti-fascist and communist past, Merz maintains a strong awareness of the collective, emphasizing the interrelation and interdependence between the individual and nature. In his works, Merz critically engages with the effects of advanced capitalism, observing how it produces highly individualized subjects devoid of affective bonds, social cohesion, or a sense of community, resulting in diminished empathy toward both the non-human and the environment.

Without nostalgia but with a critical spirit, Merz references an archaic time through the igloo form, invoking a sense of nomadism rooted in a critique of modernity. In this study, I relate this understanding of nomadism to the nomadic sensibility of Roma culture, as articulated by Daniel Baker, a British Roma artist and theorist, who has contributed significantly to our understanding of Roma aesthetics and the cultural frameworks through his art and writings ([Baker and Hjavolova 2013](#)).

## 2.2. Nomadic Sensibility in the Roma Culture

Nomadism has long been integral to the identity of the Roma people, a diasporic community that exemplifies migration as both a historical legacy and a lived reality. Drawing on this rich tradition, Baker underscores the cultural and existential significance of Roma nomadism. In *The Posthuman Glossary* ([Baker 2018](#)) Baker describes “nomadic sensibility” as follows:

It is not the actuality of nomadism that is meant here but a *legacy* of nomadism that I refer to as a *nomadic sensibility*—a sensibility through which Roma maintain an inherent understanding of the vagaries and contingencies of life on the move (290).

This “nomadic sensibility”, passed down through generations, represents a non-logocentric mode of interpretation that relies on sensory stimuli, experiential and performative knowledge, existing beyond the written word.

Roma aesthetics and the artifacts they produce are characterized by their ability to evoke kinesthetic responses, calling for action, performativity, and interaction. Baker highlights examples such as toys, textiles, and even weapons, whose materiality and functionality vary, embodying contingency, spontaneity, and ambiguity. These affordances provide, in Baker’s words, “an opportunity (for the user) to perform a variety of roles through their interaction with the artefact” ([Baker 2018](#), p. 292).

His own works reflect this aesthetic. For instance, *Survival Quilt 2023* and *Threshold #6 2021* merge the shimmer and sparkle of metallic elements (gold and silver materials) with the flexible, transportable qualities of fabric.

In recent decades, the Roma lifestyle has inspired avant-garde artists and intellectuals who perceive their unconventional, adaptable existence as a model for innovative thought. The term “Bohemian” emerged as a cultural archetype during the 19th century, merging artistic creativity, lifestyle, and Roma cultural practices. This archetype celebrates hybridity, movement, and adaptability, reflecting the broader context of migration and diasporic art.

Roma culture thus offers a framework for contemporary artists to challenge conventional understandings of borders, identities, and artistic practices, exploring the nuances of non-belonging and the inherent flexibility of nomadic life.

As the advisor and curator for four editions of the Roma Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, Baker has argued that during times of global upheaval, marginalized communities like the Roma offer alternative value systems. In the face of rising exclusionary nationalism, the Roma's adaptability and resilience present a counter-narrative to dominant discourses on belonging and home.

Finally, Baker emphasizes that the conditions characterizing the "nomadic sensibility"—contingency and provisionality—that evoke admiration for their "resourceful versatility" (Baker 2018, p. 292) also generate mistrust due to their perceived lack of accountability and rootedness. Nevertheless, Baker maintains a positive stance in his writings. Perhaps more relevant to the argument of this study is how Baker identifies the potential of Roma aesthetics and how the vocabulary of materials offers new possibilities for communication among heterogeneous, mobile groups. This positive perspective aligns with Braidotti's concept of nomadic and even transnational subjectivity, as will be developed in the analysis of Jimena Kato's work and her material vocabulary.

### 3. Jimena Kato and Braidottian Categories of Nomadism

#### 3.1. Braidotti's Concept of Nomadism

New post-identitarian theories are emerging in art criticism, closely aligned with the rhizomatic thought of Deleuze, particularly his seminal essay *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), co-authored with Félix Guattari. Frequently, transnational and identity-related issues intersect with gender theories, wherein the concept of the body becomes a metaphor for the permeability of corporeal boundaries. The feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti (1994, Italy, Australia, The Netherlands), educated in the intellectual tradition of Foucault, Irigaray, and Deleuze, has been especially adept at identifying and naming this phenomenon. Drawing on autobiographical reflection and embracing contingency and immanence, Braidotti begins with the notion of the fragmented, mutable subject to offer an affirmative alternative to binary thinking. She introduces the concept of the "nomadic subject" or "subject in transit" as a theoretical figuration. By "figuration", she refers to a "performative image on which to establish categories". In contrast to other feminists, such as Judith Butler, with whom she famously disagreed, Braidotti's thought is grounded in materiality. "Judith Butler chose the word; I take the nomadic path of the flesh" (Braidotti 1994, p. 10). This Braidottian bodily materialism can be seen as a continuation of the French school of philosophical materialism (Bachelard, Simondon), which Braidotti has coined as New Materialism. Over the past decade, Braidotti has focused on developing posthuman thought, adding a missing element: in her latest publication, she states, "posthuman thought is post-identitarian and relational: it shifts the subject from the focus on its own identity toward the threshold of active becoming" (Braidotti 2019, p. 79).

Braidotti's concept of nomadism in this article is adopted as more than a metaphor or symbolic representation of a being without boundaries. Instead, it is understood as an active state that emphasizes action, performativity, and the potential inherent in the "non-fixity of borders" (pp. 10, 26, 66—and revisions). This approach reinforces a more embodied form of artistic practice that focuses on action, becoming, and the performativity of materials. The embodied materialism advocated by Braidotti aligns more naturally with an emerging material ecology, in which the emphasis on material agency is situated.

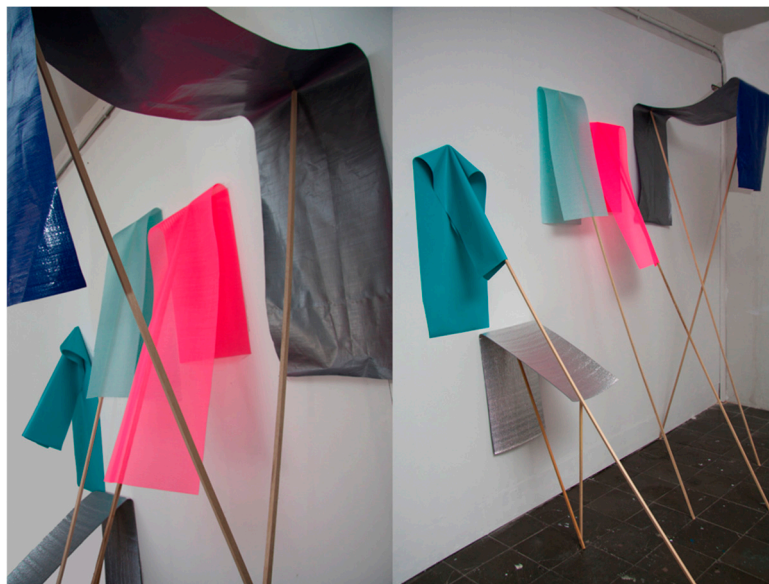
Like Braidotti, who transitioned from an Italian emigrant in Australia to a European nomad, Jimena Kato Murakami inherits the migrant condition of the Japanese settled in Peru, a community of over 100,000 people. The artist grew up in contact with her family's



Eastern culture in a multilingual environment where, in her case, Japanese and Spanish were supplemented by the German of her schooling. She becomes a nomad when she chooses to study in France, where she approaches the language of materials through artistic research. After periods of residence in Belgium and her native country, she settled in Madrid in 2013, where she produced the work under discussion, *Enclenques (Weaklings)*, 2013. This is shown in Figures 4 and 5.



**Figure 4.** Jimena Kato Murakami. Installation view of *Enclenques*, 2013. Wooden slats and wrapping paper. Variable dimensions. Nebrija Art Collection. (© Jimena Kato Murakami, Courtesy of the artist, photograph from Matadero Creators Archive).



**Figure 5.** Jimena Kato Murakami. Detail of *Enclenques*, 2013. Wooden slats and wrapping paper, variable dimensions. Nebrija Art Collection. (© Jimena Kato Murakami, Courtesy of the artist, photograph from Matadero Creators Archive).

### 3.2. Nomadism in Diasporic Art

Kato could, in a sense, be included among contemporary artists often described as “cultural nomads”. However, she identifies more strongly with her dual status as both a migrant and a woman. Her work is situated within the framework of diasporic art, reflecting the migratory experiences shared by many Latin American artists.

In “From Latin American Art to Art from Latin America”, (Mosquera 2003) Mosquera articulates several themes that resonate with the context of Kato’s art. He discusses cultural hybridization, suggesting that contemporary art increasingly embodies the interconnectedness of cultures, transcending national and regional boundaries. This perspective aligns with the concept of nomadism, which rejects fixed identities in favor of transitory and relational ones. Mosquera also calls for a decentering of the artistic canon, advocating for a pluralistic understanding of art that values contributions from artists in the Global South and diasporic contexts. This is particularly relevant to diasporic art, where artists work from “in-between” spaces, actively challenging the dominance of Western-centric discourses in art. Additionally, Mosquera emphasizes the transformative role of peripheral or non-Western artists, who, through their migratory and hybrid practices, reshape the global art scene.

Several issues surfaced at the recent Venice Biennale in 2024, titled *Foreigners Everywhere* and curated by Brazilian Adriano Pedrosa. Despite the presence of typically underrepresented artists and the material and conceptual complexity of many works, some critics have raised concerns about tokenization and oversimplification, with an excessive focus on identity. Almost twenty-five years ago, critic Gerardo Mosquera warned about the risk of self-exoticization among artists from the Global South. Mosquera notes that diasporic art often displays a tendency toward the fragmented, molecular, and fragile—qualities that are particularly evident in Kato’s *Enclenques (Weaklings)*, 2013. This piece is defined by its inherent fragility and instability, highlighting the precarious and transient nature of diasporic identity and experience.

The installation comprises modules constructed from brightly colored packing materials, supported by wooden slats. The concept of dwelling is most effectively conveyed in the double modules (Figure 5), which evoke the makeshift quality of nomadic tipis or tents. In an earlier work predating *Enclenques*, Kato employed a similar approach by assembling a kit of eight slats designed to form a cube, suggesting a precarious housing structure. On that occasion, in addition to creating a provisional habitable space, she explored the potential for developing a material vocabulary within the constructed environment. In earlier installations such as *There’s No Place Like Home*, 2009, the Peruvian artist subtly critiques the precarious nature of housing conditions resulting from evictions and natural disasters.

*Enclenques* revisits the concept of precarious housing constructions by addressing issues such as space, territory, and movement. The contrast between the softness of the packing materials and the verticality of the wooden structures alludes to an exploration of adaptability and habitability.

As Kato recalled in a 2018 interview, her concerns revolve around questions of how to occupy space, how territory is defined at the moment of constructing something, and how to create a material vocabulary within the context of precarity:

When I arrive in Madrid and have my studio, I start to use these materials because, on one hand, since I began working in sculpture, one of my recurring concerns in my work has been space and territory, and also materials. Different types of materials, creating tensions and (exploring) how materials dialogue with one another. (Kato Murakami and Angoso de Guzmán 2018)

### 3.3. Braidottian Categories: Ecology of Materials, Performativity and Potentiality

Among Braidotti’s contributions, there are three categories that I find particularly relevant to Jimena Kato’s work: the category of embodied materialism, performativity, and potentiality. As previously outlined, the first category is expressed as a figuration of the fragmented and sexual subject, here manifested through an ecology of materials. In artistic practice, the embodiment of Braidottian thought constitutes a kind of “ecology

of materials”, where the empathetic creator–material dialogue is situated as a form of communication preceding both words and reason. Kato expressed this as follows:

I think materials already have their own personality, their own characteristics, and that alone gives a lot of information. So, it’s a way of doing things with some distance, of not imposing an idea onto the material. I have an installation where I reference the manifesto of the GUTAI group, who were the first to perform in Japan. Klein was inspired by them and brought performance to Europe. In their manifesto, they said that what artists do is torture materials. And they advocated for the liberation of materials. (Kato Murakami and Angoso de Guzmán 2018)

Kato’s engagement with materials resonates with the experimental ethos of the Japanese Gutai group, particularly as articulated in their 1956 manifesto, which emphasized the vitality of materials and the creative tension between the artist and the medium. This connection situates Kato’s practice within a broader transnational dialogue, aligning her work with Gutai’s call for an “art that does not rely on the brush or the conventional techniques of representation” (Yoshihara [1956] 2015) but instead foregrounds the agency of materials themselves. Through this lens, Kato’s precarious constructions echo Gutai’s spirit of material exploration while addressing contemporary concerns related to migration and dwelling.

Kato’s dialogue with materials inherently critiques the logocentrism of Western tradition and rejects the dominance of written language. As she asserts above, her principal reference is the Gutai group, which was active in post-World War II Japan and whose manifesto, *Let the Materials Speak*, published in 1956, proclaims the liberation of materials. These artists sought to break free from traditional art forms and engage directly with raw materials to reveal their inherent vitality. Yoshihara’s manifesto stated that materials should “speak for themselves” and that artists should allow them to assert their natural qualities without imposing strict control. This led to experimental works where the interaction between artist, material, and environment was central, often resulting in ephemeral or performative pieces that celebrated transformation and impermanence. In that text, Jiro Yoshihara wrote the following:

Enclose these corpses in their graves. Gutai art does not alter the material: it gives it life. Gutai art does not falsify the material. In Gutai art, the human spirit and matter extend a hand to each other, even though they are otherwise opposed. The material is not absorbed by the spirit. The spirit does not compel the material to submit. If the material is left as it is, presenting itself solely as material, it begins to tell us something, speaking with a powerful voice. To elevate the spirit means to bring the material to the level of the spirit”. (Yoshihara [1956] 2015, pp. 32–34)

### 3.4. Performativity

Thus, the Gutai group not only rejects the symbolic role of materials and their inherited meanings, but also advocates for performativity, the second category at play. Following the Gutai manifesto, Kato distances herself from the idea of subjugating objects, from imposing her will titanically upon materials. In the artist’s words: “That’s why I also talk about performance, because I’m interested in giving materials the space to express themselves” (Kato Murakami and Angoso de Guzmán 2018, n.p.). As Yoshihara declared, Kato’s respect for the agency of materials is embedded in an Eastern tradition that values performativity, evident in the art of tea, and is categorized as “art” despite its ephemeral nature. These frozen moments of ritual contrast with the notion of monumentality and permanence prevalent in Western culture. In this performative threshold, the artist describes the creative process as one of experimentation and experience, where adaptability, transience, and instability are integral to the works and engage the viewer on a psychomotor level. Both

practices challenge the permanence and monumentality often associated with Western art traditions, embracing transience and unpredictability. Kato's work, like Gutai's, reflects a break from rigid artistic conventions and aligns with broader philosophies that celebrate hybridity, transformation, and the unexpected. Both demonstrate a deep respect for the intrinsic qualities of materials and the process-driven creation of art that invites viewers to consider the fleeting and dynamic aspects of existence. From a material perspective, Kato's work also aligns with the rhizomatic thinking of Deleuze and Guattari, with tensions and lines of flight exploring how corporeality permeates the work in relation to gravity, the possibilities, and the limitations of the body.

Secondly, Kato's work was exhibited as part of a group show entitled *Liminal States* in 2018 at Centro Cultural Galileo in Madrid, inspired by Arnold van Gennep's *Rites of Passage Theory*; in this, he introduced the concept of liminality in his study of rituals and their ability to mark transitions in individuals' lives (birth, puberty). The concept of liminary can be applied to artistic and theater performance as it provides a space in which participants (actors, viewers, artists) experience a suspension of everyday reality (Carlson 1996). This reflexive nature of performance creates a temporary space of transformation that can be a generative, creative force, also known as potentiality.

### 3.5. Potentiality

The third category, potentiality, is evident in *Enclenques* when this acceptance of the agency of materials is combined with instability, thereby incorporating the factor of time. In this unstable equilibrium lies the rest before the fall, an element that resonates through its potentiality. Faced with the impossibility of permanence, the possibility of collapse is accepted. During the exhibition *Liminal States* at the Centro Cultural Galileo in Madrid, the fragile, tension-filled installation collapsed in front of a visitor. Perhaps the viewer felt the urge to touch the brightly colored material or simply got too close. Kato challenges us when she places us in a vulnerable, violated space, breaking with the conventions of stability, permanence, and solidity so deeply ingrained in Western sculpture. But this is not just about contemplating a space of uncertainty, like Merz's visual metaphors of a "blank" space; rather, it is about feeling it—feeling the threat. The notion of instability is intangible—being a spatiotemporal (a moment and place) void of control. It may seem like a light, even futile action, but it holds the potential to shuffle, to break the deck, to influence the psyche and the body, emotions, and affects.

The strength of this piece lies precisely in the tension that sustains it, a sort of liminal state between the moment of rest and the moment of movement. This is the equilibrium of an instant, of certain tensions, but which at any moment can shift, and will shift, as it will collapse in an instant. *Enclenques* fosters a type of artistic practice that remains open to various possibilities—a dynamic process.

*Enclenques* places the viewer in an intermediate space, or liminal state from an anthropological perspective, where the embodied and situated body becomes nomadic. As Braidotti writes concerning nomadism and liminal spaces:

Nomadism is a culture of joy, a joyful affirmation of the positivity of existence and difference. (. . .). Nomadism is a culture of empathy, of alliance, of affirming the vital force within each of us. (. . .) Becoming is about accepting the vertigo of liminal spaces, it is about walking towards the future with no other safeguard than our own inner reality. . . because, to risk becoming, one must have the strength of one's roots and trust in the other, like any nomad". (Cited in Palaisi 2018, p. 79; Braidotti 2004, p. 216)

Another Latin American artist, Doris Salcedo (Bogota, 1958), has successfully generated a situation of profound unease and distress for the spectator in her installations,

whose themes are political violence and particularly that exercised by forced migrations. For example, in the celebrated installation *Shibboleth*, in 2007 in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in London, she opened a huge fracture that evoked the gap that exists between the First and Third Worlds. More recently, the *Palimpsest Project*, displayed in 2017–2018 at the Crystal Palace of the Reina Sofia Museum, pays homage to the lives cut short at sea off European coasts. And it achieves this with a subtle and poetic materiality: the names of the deceased appear written with drops of water, to disappear quickly on the floor. This floor is composed of a toxic material that forces visitors to wear socks. It thus generates a situation of danger, of profound discomfort through an embodied materiality, while honoring the deceased and renouncing identities and nationalities.

#### 4. Conclusions: The Potentiality and Performativity of Materials

Returning to the questions that opened this article: How can precarity, migration, and dwelling be conveyed through art? How can complex concepts be expressed without relying solely on words? Grounded in Braidotti's theoretical framework, this study has sought to examine embedded and embodied materialist artistic practices. Both Mario Merz and Jimena Kato evoke nomadism by activating the performative and potentiality of materials, a form of embodied materialism that engages the viewer in dynamic and relational ways.

The case studies analyzed here—Merz, Kato, and to a lesser extent, Doris Salcedo—share a unifying thread in their affirmative approach to *potentia*, as conceptualized by Deleuze and Guattari and expanded upon in Braidotti's recent writings. As Braidotti posits, “the ethical idea is to mobilize the active powers of life in the affirmative mode of *potentia*. This actualizes the cognitive, affective, and sensorial means to cultivate degrees of empowerment and affirmation of one's interconnections to others in their multiplicity” (Braidotti 2019, p. 58).

Merz employs the igloo as a symbolic form that critiques industrial modernity, while simultaneously invoking a timeless nomadic sensibility. This form resonates with the latent discontents of advanced capitalism, offering a non-logocentric mode of interpretation. By contrast, Kato's installations reference the precarious constructions of postmodernity, shaped by resource scarcity and the urgency of inhabiting transient spaces.

Merz's work navigates the *intermezzo*—the “in-between” spaces—imbued with a nomadic sensibility that may resonate with the Roma tradition. His igloos, supported by fragile structures, evoke energy flows that fracture a sense of timelessness, gesturing toward becoming and transformation. These works critique modern capitalist individualism while hypothetically engaging with the Roma tradition of migration as a negotiation of identity, space, and belonging. As Baker suggests, the Roma's historical resilience and adaptability could inform an understanding of nomadism as both a cultural and artistic strategy of resistance, potentially offering a lens through which to interpret aspects of Merz's artistic practice.

Kato's sculptural works, such as *Enclenques*, explore liminality with visceral intensity, presenting the viewer with sensations of imbalance, gravitational pull, and vertigo. These elements evoke the precarity and urgency of transient existence. As Braidotti aptly notes, “Global migration exemplifies the schizoid double-pull of speed and stasis, movement and arrest” (Braidotti 2019, p. 31).

Allowing materials to “speak” and granting them affective and sensorial agency embodies the affirmative power of *potentia*—a concept central to Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy. This approach aligns with Braidotti's argument in *Posthuman Knowledge* (Braidotti and Hlavajova 2019), where she advocates for a posthumanized subjectivity framed by affirmative convergence. This framework challenges inherited notions of self-representation and the conventional understanding of what it means to be human (Braidotti 2019, p. 41).

Ultimately, the affirmative sense of potentiality articulated by Braidotti frames subjectivity as simultaneously post-personal and pre-individual, relational, and perpetually negotiated in connection with multiple others. It is through this relational and dynamic lens that the works of Merz, Kato, and others acquire their profound capacity to interrogate and reimagine the conditions they seek to address.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Additional data in the form of the videotape taken of the artist's interview is available under request as documentation of Nebrija Art Collection.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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