Urban living and the search for new societal metaphors: Insights from Brussels participatory arts practices

Introduction

The ongoing globalisation of society and its related flows of migration and pluralisation entail not only economic, but also far-reaching social changes. Within this process, the rapid urbanisation adds an extra dynamic, as cities are confronted with an increase of inhabitants from various cultural backgrounds (Corijn, 2009). In light of these transitions, the co-presence of different social and cultural groups has created a need for new ways to relate the right to individual freedom and hence diversity, to the necessity of social coherence (Lorenz, 2016; Oosterlynck et al., 2016). In this search, which poses a significant challenge to a variety of (social) practices and sectors, participatory arts practices have increasingly gained in relevance (Beyes, 2010; Pollock & Paddison, 2010). As argued by Clements (2011), the debate on participatory art is highly contextual and shaped by a range of discourses besides aesthetics, such as access and inclusion, cultural identity, collective work, emancipation, etc. Possible examples are therefore quite diverse (e.g. a theatre production with residents of a disadvantaged neighbourhood, the repurposing of a city hall by an artist in dialogue with citizens, a video art practice with young refugees). Nevertheless, participatory arts practices invariably have a common foundation: by questioning existing cultural realities, they combine an artistic intervention with a dimension of social transformation (Clements, 2011). More so, by addressing missing artistic forms (i.e. those that are underrepresented in the prevailing cultural canon) and taking into account cultural reference patterns from the people involved (i.e. encouraging artistic expression from social groups who are often excluded from society), these practices are attributed an important, critical role in producing new forms of societal metaphors that go beyond the discourse of a common, national history (Bloomfield & Bianchini 2001;

Corijn, 2009). In academic literature this has often resulted into a series of ambitious claims concerning the perceived roles of participatory art, ranging from 'strengthening a sense of place', 'promoting local identity' to 'developing a sense of community' (Hall & Robertson, 2001; Thompson et al., 2005). Such claims do not only fail to acknowledge the contested nature of these concepts (Massey, 1994), which makes participatory art susceptible to instrumental approaches, for example in the context of urban regeneration, they also echo the idea that societies can be structured around a collective identity, that is represented and reproduced through arts or culture (Corijn, 2009). Whereas the same rationale has always underpinned the inclusion models of European nation states and their cultural perspectives, it is generally accepted that the world is going through an all-encompassing rescaling process, in which spaces of flows and places are restructured and competitive cities undermine national solidarities (Merrifield, 2014). Although the nation-state remains an important institutional form, the dominance of international companies over national politics has shattered the idea of a common cultural project supported by national tradition (Bloomfield & Bianchini, 2001), whilst post-national identities and experiences disrupt normative and presumed categories of social life. Within this 'post-national constellation', *the city becomes a junction for political and social reconstruction of another kind'* (Corijn, 2009, p.199).

It is in this context that participatory art takes its significance. As part of a growing awareness that investments into a solidarity that coheres around a common nation will only reinforce existing inequalities within cities, these practices are being scrutinized for their critical potential. Theorising them as 'norm-defying practices' (Schuermans et al., 2012, p.676) that can not only challenge the status quo, but open up space for radical alternatives (Beyes, 2010), participatory arts practices are attributed an important role in counterbalancing the dominant social and cultural order and tackling dynamics of exclusion. By supporting a forum for alternative codes and frameworks, participatory art aims to open up prevailing cultural regimes,

which are usually represented by national institutions (e.g. museums, cultural centres). In doing so, they lie at the heart of what characterizes urban reality: living with difference (Lofland, 1973). Relying on intercultural connections and differences in proximity, these forms of cultural production often occur at the margin of the official cultural sector. Whether they are initiated by individual artists, set up by existing art organisations or have simply grown organically, participatory arts practices have their own sites in intermediate spaces and around unsolved matters (Groth & Corijn, 2005).

In this article, we build on our understanding of participatory art's mandate as a social pedagogical mandate (Dewinter et al., 2021) – i.e. a mandate to engage with fundamental questions about the nature of 'the social' (Lorenz, 2016). Irrespective of the claims in academic literature, which often tend to linger at a conceptual level (Hall & Robertson, 2001; Schuermans et al., 2012), these 'practices of disruption' are embedded in the complexity and diversity of urban reality. They are not only important economic vehicles in the context of city marketing or urban regeneration, but mainly different ways in the production of social bonds and interactions (Corijn, 2009). In their daily encounters with diverse urban actors, including those most threatened with bond disruption, disintegration and exclusion, participatory arts practices seek to pioneer new forms of societal metaphors, not in the narrow, linguistic sense of the word, yet in terms of possible arrangements of what constitutes social bonds in an increasingly urban society. Moreover, in treating these metaphors not as fixed entities but as the subject of reflexive negotiations, they uphold, both at the individual and public level, the premise that there are always alternatives (Lorenz, 2016).

In light of this social pedagogical mandate, this article aims to develop an empirical understanding of how these new societal metaphors in an increasingly urban society may look like. Drawing on the perspective of practitioners in Brussels, the capital city of the European

Union, we examine how these practices intervene in the social relations between people, which challenges are being addressed and which individuals are at the heart of these challenges.

Urban living and the role of (participatory) arts practices: The Brussels case

There is no question that we can interpret the growing relevance of participatory art as part of a renewed interest in social engagement in the arts, which has manifested itself from the 1990s onwards. This 'social turn' has been extensively discussed over the past decades. As such, the voices of Bourriaud (1998), Bishop (2006) and Kester (2011) have become almost as important to the field as the art they scrutinize. Notwithstanding the fact that they have undeniably sparked the debate about participation in the arts, concerning the connection with urban living, several other authors are of relevance.

In the age of globalisation, the discussion on the role and importance of (participatory) arts practices in contemporary cities has been largely inspired by the 'creative city' paradigm (Landry & Bianchini 1995), in which a more general re-evaluation of the function of the city in the 1980s and 1990s was transmuted into a new discourse of innovation-driven growth (Banks & O'Connor, 2017). Within this paradigm, cultural activities and actors appeared as a new kind of economic entrepreneurs and 'creativity' acquired an instrumental purpose in the 'branding' of a city (Landry & Bianchini, 1995). When Richard Florida formulated his hypothesis on the 'rise of the creative class' (2002) the drive for competitivity reached its apotheosis: attracting the highly acclaimed 'creative class' became the leading principle and the cultural sector stood idly by as the most commercial leisure and consumption activities were rolled out in the name of culture (Banks & O'Connor, 2017).

Besides this purely economic narrative, there is a strand of authors for whom the urban remains a significant formative arena, not only as the daily space of over half of the world's population, yet also as the most palpable manifestation of difference and heterogeneity placed

together. Following Amin (2006), urban living highlights the challenges of negotiating gender, class and racial or ethnic disparities placed in near proximity. Bauböck (2003) goes even further, stating that the city should be conceived as *'a political space inside the territorial nation-state where multicultural and transnational identities can be more freely articulated'* (p.142). This has not only led to a more recent strand of literature on 'conviviality', 'cosmopolitanism', 'hybridity' etc. (Noble, 2013), but it has also prompted researchers to concretely explore the potential of participatory arts practices to critically engage with everyday urban life (e.g. Loftus, 2009; Zebracki et al., 2010). Though, notwithstanding critical accounts of the economic importance of these transitions and the positioning of nation-states in the world system, the question that arises here is what constitutes social bonds in such a context. How is it possible to build solidarity out of multiplicity?

A case in which this need for a new register of social coherence is clearly at stake is Brussels. As the capital city of Belgium, Brussels has never been a successful national project. Its current status, as one of the three regional territories in the Belgian Federal State structure, is the result of the so-called 'pacification model' that made an end to the linguistic dispute between the Dutch-speakers in the North and the French-speakers in the South (Van Wynsberghe, 2013). Squeezed between Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia, the bilingual Brussels city-region hosts more than 1.2 million inhabitants, of which 35.5% does not have the Belgian nationality. In January 2021, 185 different nationalities were registered (BISA, 2022). For matters relating to culture, education, sports, welfare and care, Brussels is a bi-communitarian city where Flemish and French-speaking institutions operate independently. In addition to a number of federal institutions that fall under the 'general interest' of Belgium (Federal Government, 2020), the city houses a separate network of Flemish and French-speaking theatres, museums, cultural centres and schools, which, moreover, are historically

rooted in two different philosophical paradigms. While the Flemish cultural policy is based on community building and the involvement of target groups that are difficult to reach, the French-speaking Community echoes a softened Belgian version of French Republicanism in which every community, every minority, forms an obstacle to the (democratic and political) society (BKO-RAB, 2014). Besides, there are several other policy levels that hold cultural competences, i.e. the Brussels-Capital Region, the Community Commissions, the 19 municipalities and, to some extent, the European Union too. This specific configuration renders the institutional context in Brussels far from evident.

Even though the French-speaking Community in Brussels still forms a majority and French remains the primary language of public communication, the Brussels identity cannot be reduced to Belgium's traditional cleavages, especially the French-speaking/Flemish-speaking divide. Quite the contrary, Rea (2013) argues, as Brussels is a city built by waves of migrations, first by migratory flows within Belgium and, more recently by the many migratory movements that have turned Brussels into a culturally diverse city. Today, more than 40% of the households are linguistically mixed (Corijn & Vloeberghs, 2013) and English – not Dutch – is the second most commonly spoken language, yet there is also the use of Lingala, Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Romanian etc. (Janssens, 2018). Moreover, the diversity of the Brussels population is manifested in a socio-economic reality as well. As the second richest region in Europe, but with an average income per capita that is 15% below the Belgian average, Brussels is a dual city. This duality is reflected by strong spatial segregation too, with a city centre occupied by the poor – the largest number of young people lives in the so-called 'poor crescent', just west of the pentagon – and the eastern residential areas attracting more affluent residents (Corijn & Vloeberghs, 2013).

Brussels is a post-national city. Whereas cultural policy structures stay caught in their communitarian framework, Brussels reality produces a multitude of cultural and artistic

realities. Dutch-speaking and French-speaking cultural frameworks have been contaminated by and mingled with the cultures that have been brought by the various flows of immigrants and the Brussels urban cultures that have emerged over the past few decades (Rea, 2013). It is here that participatory arts practices are called upon their social pedagogical mandate. Not as economic pioneers in name of the 'creative city', but as part of a constructed urban culture, a hybrid outcome of crossbreeding, building a new register of social coherence that depends more on the degree and quality of participation than on representation (Corijn, 2009). As such, Brussels provides an interesting case to explore the role of participatory arts practices in relation to urban living and to gain a deeper understanding of how social solidarity can be defined and secured in a post-national context.

Methodology

Data collection

The findings are based on semi-structured interviews conducted with practitioners working across different layers of the Brussels participatory arts scene. To get an extensive picture of the field, recruitment occurred according to five self-constructed categories: (1) individual artists who deliberately engage with the urban context in a participatory way (2) innovatory artistic practices, often smaller ones, working at the crossroads of arts and the city (3) participatory arts practices with a pronounced artistic and social dimension (building on what in Flanders used to be labeled as social-artistic work) (4) bigger art institutions and (Flemish) community centers working in a participatory way (5) Brussels connoisseurs/experts with former experience in one of these foregoing categories. For each category at least 5 respondents were contacted with an initial request for participation; 20 of them agreed to participate. Respondents were selected according to the purposeful sampling principle (Patton, 2002),

varying between uni-communitarian organisations (mainly subsidized by the Flemish *or* French-speaking Community and generally also by the VGC *or* COCOF[1]), bi-communitarian organisations (mainly subsidized by the Flemish *and* French-speaking Community also by the VGC *and/or* COCOF) and institutions subsidized by the Federal Government. The practices in our sample are varied, both in terms of artistic format (ranging from a specific focus on theater or music to a mix of more diverse art forms) and in relation to the social aspect (focusing either on a specific group, e.g. youngsters in vulnerable situations, amateur musicians from various backgrounds, or starting from the (disadvantaged) neighbourhood in which they are located). Some respondents preferred a double interview and invited someone they work closely with. Probably due to the researchers' Flemish background, the first sample contained remarkably more Flemish organisations. Therefore, respondents were asked to refer to a French-speaking or bi-communitarian partner. In this way, 6 additional respondents were included. Individual artists were placed in the category 'other' when they do not receive core Community funding, but rather, depending on the project, receive grants at regional, community or municipal level. The Brussels connoisseurs/experts were also included in this 'other' category, regardless of the organisation in which they gained their experience.

*[**Table 1:** Insert here]*

*[**Table 2**: Insert here – or in the appendix]*

As our objective is to shed light upon the social pedagogical mandate of participatory arts practices, the data we will elaborate upon were guided by five main questions: (1) Which urban challenges and/or themes are you aiming to address in your practice? (2) Which individuals

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[1] Since Brussels is the only bilingual area of Belgium, community matters in the Brussels Capital Region are dealt with by the Community Commissions: the Flemish Community Commission (VGC) and the French Community Commission (COCOF). They are under the guardianship of the Community governments and are deemed to respect and apply the decrees in force. A joint and bilingual Community Commission (GGC/COCOM) is in charge of so-called bi-community matters, but has - for the time being - no cultural competences (Van Wynsberghe, 2013).

and/or groups do you consider to be at the heart of these challenges? (3) As a practitioner, what is your perspective on urban living and how does participatory art contribute to this? (4) From a policy perspective, what are the expectations towards urban living and how do you deal with these expectations? And, (5) Why do you think participatory arts practices are being looked at to fulfil this role?

All interviews were conducted by the first author. 19 out of 26 interviews were administered in Dutch, 3 in French and 4 in a combination of French and English. Due to the measures taken to prevent the spread of the covid-19 pandemic, 12 out of 26 interviews were conducted online via Skype or Zoom. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed ad verbatim.

Data analysis

Lacking an empirical understanding of how participatory arts practices intervene in the social relations between people, we deliberately engaged in a conventional approach to qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005), allowing categories and names for categories to flow from the data. Initially emerging codes were structured in frequent or dominant categories and subordinate clusters and subsequently reassembled into the findings presented here. In doing so, we used Nvivo software for qualitative data analysis (Nvivo 12 QRS, 2018). In the next section, we discuss our findings, illustrated by quotations of the respondents (R), with (T) referring to the five categories described above. All excerpts were translated from Dutch or French to English by the authors.

Findings

Three main themes recurred throughout the transcripts: (1) Urbanity (2) Participation and (3) (Post-national) belonging. In the following, we elaborate on each theme.

Debating urbanity: Opening up socio-spatial patterns?

When it comes to expertise in engaging with the actual lifeworld of citizens, participatory arts practices have become an integral part of today's urban environment. Similar to policy makers and social welfare organisations, these practices interfere in the relationship between individual and society. Though, whereas target group thinking seems to be strongly embedded in the latter's daily practice, the practices in our research try to re-connect those separate realities by gathering people around concrete 'urban issues' – e.g. scarcity of public space, high vacancy rate, social polarisation – that are rooted in the specific socio-spatial structures of a city:

> *The starting point [of social practices] is often the target group, with or without specific problems, yet here the starting point is space. That is what connects people, that is what brings people together. (R10-T2)*

Several of these urban issues seem to be a logical result of the dense mix of individuals using or living in a relatively small amount of space, which in Brussels is rendered even more complicated by the presence of multiple languages. What this argument however conceals, is that the conditions in which individuals can contribute to the shaping of that urban space are unequally distributed. This *'impression of epistemic exclusion'* (Goossens et al., 2020, p.564), namely that the voice, knowledge, opinions and interests of certain groups are of less concern for city administrators, is however well-documented in literature on gentrification:

> *Governments often present us with the image that there is no poverty, that they invest a lot in education and that people's health is doing well [...] but if you go more deeply and look into the realities in our cities [...] One part of that city is living in very good conditions and the majority is living in very bad conditions, and that involves all the things that contribute to the quality of life: the quality of housing, the*

quality of the labour market, the quality of health care, the quality of the air we breathe, the water we

drink… (R16-T4)

It is not only the perceived gap between the system-world and the life-world that becomes apparent in the foregoing quote, but so is the ability of participatory arts practices to challenge the everyday practices of this systemic world. By penetrating deeply into the social fabric of the city and engaging with urgent matters in the life-world of participants, they load 'matters of fact' with 'matters of concern' (Latour, 2004) and help to define the debates on the challenges that are connected with urbanity.

One of those 'matters of concern', which became even more acute during the COVID-19 pandemic, is the lack of public space (R8, R9, R10, R20, R22). In Brussels, this is especially true for the less affluent municipalities in the Canal Zone, which witnessed parallel initiatives of demolition, revalorisation and protection of industrial heritage:

There is low and high Molenbeek. Low Molenbeek is really jam-packed [...] Up to the West Station and

from there it is actually housing blocks, but you have a lot of urbanity and little green space [...] That is

why those organisations are very important, because you can offer people a place to go. (R9-T4)

What the respondent alludes to in the last part of the quote, is that the lack of qualitative public space has prompted a proliferation of social and cultural projects in the Canal Zone, initiated by either private, public or semi-public actors. As argued earlier by Rouyet (2014) the numerous square metres of abandoned industrial properties in this area have undeniably attracted new players – be it from a socio-economic, cultural or artistic perspective. Some of them include participatory arts practices that explicitly choose to address the city's vacancy rate and connect it with the aim for regeneration of public space:

On the one hand, there is the vacancy level [...] On the other hand, there is a bunch of citizens who need

space and a place to be, to hang out, to participate, to organize things themselves, to be able to be activist

etc. So that is what we are doing, linking those two needs. (R10-T2)

For a major part of the respondents it is however evident that these urban issues and their tangible socio-spatial repercussions have a deeper socio-economic basis (R1, R2, R4, R8, R9, R12, R16, R20). In many cases, social exclusion and its spatial concentration are related to the same challenges: a lack of connection to the labour market and the failure to reap the benefits of redistribution (e.g. social security, housing, education):

> *It is going at a furious pace that this society is being split in two socio-economically [...] It is just not acceptable anymore how many people are completely broke, have no housing [...] I have been living here for 15 years and I've seen it plummeting. On the other hand I hear governments talking about jobs, jobs, jobs, while I think: 'this is not acceptable, this cannot go on'. (R1-T3)*

In the face of globalisation, social polarisation between rich and poor has only intensified. Cities have restructured their spatial arrangements by equipping the attractive neighbourhoods with new infrastructure and, when necessary, driving the lower income groups away to pull in investors and middle class inhabitants (R1, R8, R10). Since urban growth in Brussels has mainly occurred in the suburban belt, the new neighbourhoods in the periphery were geared towards the higher income groups, whereas the lower income groups were left behind in the city centre. Moreover, the successive waves of migration followed the same pattern with rich immigrants settling in the eastern periphery and poorer immigrants ending up in the western working-class districts, the aforementioned 'poor crescent' (Kesteloot & Loopmans, 2009).

In the following quote, one of the respondents refers to this deeper socio-economic gap and explains that participatory art is more than the creation of a preconceived artistic project. By offering insight into the actual lifeworld of participants' urban environment as well as into the barriers they face on a daily basis, its participatory way of working aims to unveil deeper mechanisms of social and cultural exclusion.

> *It is no longer about participation in small projects to redevelop one's own neighbourhood square [...] That is pure fringe, that is marginal. Fundamentally, there is only one thing that matters, making sure you have food on the table in the evening and that your children have a lunch box with decent food and*

not a bag of chips or nothing [...] It means having work, having an income, meeting other people on the
work floor [...] It is only when you feel respected, only when everything is in balance, that you start to
get involved in the neighbourhood committee at school and maybe at a community centre meeting. (R20-
T5)

In line with this, another respondent refers to the importance of mental space, since urban challenges are not only related to the need for physical space, for the socio-spatial groups at the heart of these challenges it is also about *'a space to breathe, literally'* (R9). This often translates into a way of working that is radically open (i.e. without any preconditions, but also without any requirement to participate) and responds to basic human needs, as a meaningful dialogue on urban living can only occur when all people involved can participate in this negotiation on an equal footing:

There is a broad spectrum of involvement [...] We try to be spontaneous, to be flexible enough, no
administration, no registration, you don't have to subscribe, no membership cards etc. (R10-T2)

If you expect people at a rehearsal, that aspect of food [...] It's not just because people live in poverty,
but also because then people relax a bit, start chatting to each other. However, we also knew that some
people, if they didn't come to us for dinner, didn't have any food that day, or they came with a piece of
dry baguette they got somewhere. (R4-T5)

In spite of this openness, participatory arts practices sometimes run up against their limits. As becomes clear in the following quotes, the precarity of some participants is so severe that practitioners are unable to provide a response without hampering the rest of the artistic working process:

The discussion you just heard is about people who live here on the site, who have nested there, and for
as long as we were not doing anything ourselves and it was winter, we thought: 'well, let them stay'. But
there comes a time when you have to say: 'it stops now'. (R10-T2)

You get a large group of homeless people or people who have lost all hope, who are just looking for a
warm place, but who are unmotivated to participate in any way. We always try, and sometimes we succeed

[...] That's difficult, a system of openness, but at the same time you get groups that slow down your working process [...] The worst thing is that you know there is no alternative for these people. (R4-T5)

Moving beyond dominant (art) forms and forging new connections between life-world and system-world, according to Trienekens and Hillaert (2015), it is precisely this difference in expression that equips participatory arts practices to address the challenges of a society in transition. In their daily encounters with diverse urban actors, including the most vulnerable, artists and practitioners engage with concrete urban issues and seek to make the system-world a mandatory part of this. At the same time, the above quotes reveal that participatory arts practices are confronted with systemic gaps that are beyond their means. Although these practices can reveal ingrained socio-spatial patterns of exclusion and inclusion and even loosen them, they cannot disrupt them without changes at a structural level.

'We are no participation whores'

The increasing popularity of participatory arts practices in dealing with urban challenges has made many artists and practitioners reflect critically on their own role. For a number of respondents (R3, R9, R10, R14, R20), this role already starts with a valid sociological reflection, both of the neighbourhood and of one's own position as an artist or practitioner:

If you treat people like rubbish and make a neighbourhood newsletter that is uglier than a piece of toilet paper, well, to put it bluntly, in a shabby community centre, how could it be that no one comes in? People are ashamed to live next to a community centre. The fact that there is a community centre means that it is a socially disadvantaged neighbourhood [...] If you don't realize that as a professional you are someone who arrives in the morning and leaves in the evening and who - young people once told me - has work there because of the shit they live in, because it is through their poverty that work is created for these middle-class social workers and it is through their shit that resources are created to realize participatory arts practices. (R20-T5)

In line with this, it appears that many respondents are rather critical of the current hype that surrounds the word 'participation'. According to one of the artists, some of the projects that claim to come under this heading are merely an attempt to *'rejuvenate'* something that already existed by adding a participatory perspective to it (R14). Real participation, as the following respondent put it, manifests itself in a commitment that may go beyond the scope of the artistic process:

> *That is important for these projects, that the artist sees it as a commitment that may be made for a longer period of time. That is not an obligation, but if an artist really says: 'the project is over and ciao', than is he really a participatory artist? (R4-T5).*

When it comes to engagement with concrete urban issues, the following respondent defines his role as 'helping' participants 'to imagine' alternatives that address these issues:

> *We have the most densely populated neighbourhood in Brussels [...] We have 40 000 square metres, 10 000 square metres covered in a fantastic way, which is often empty from Monday to Thursday. We can make this place available to anyone who wants to use it in an open, accessible way. Good to have this idea, but there is no one who really shows up if you just write it on the website, so you have to find ways to open it up, to make people understand what the potential of this space is. How to use it in other ways, helping people to imagine it. (R8-T2)*

At the same time, artists and practitioners have to be able to step aside to offer participants a safe space to turn their own reality into part of the urban debate. As one respondent illustrates, this also implies accepting that a project may slip through your fingers in an unexpected way:

> *We had bought a crazy lot of books from someone who was liquidating his private library and that led to the funny effect that children were taking books out of the library and were walking around with those in the streets and if they didn't know us yet, they asked us: 'Sir, do you want to buy a book? Only 5 euro'. The idea slipped through our fingers, but in a pleasant way (R12-T4).*

In the following quote however, one of the artists points out that this unassuming attitude was partly strained by the COVID-19 crisis, as he observed with dismay a number of practices

folding back on themselves instead of representing the voice of those people most affected by the crisis:

> *In the media you heard a lot of people from the arts sector complaining about the impact of the pandemic, and that worried me a bit, because they didn't seem to be aware of their exceptional position [...] While there is such a large part of the population that you supposedly represent with your participatory projects, but at that moment it wasn't about those people. At that moment, it was simply about 'we will no longer have an income as artists and cultural sector'. (R14-T1)*

By referring to this exceptional position, the above artist is implicitly critical of existing power relations which manifest themselves in socio-spatial patterns of inclusion and exclusion, yet which also permeate the art world. Of course, participatory art is part of a broader tendency within the arts to engage differently with audiences and to involve them more as active partners in the processes of creation and meaning production. In the same vein, for many cultural institutions, a focus on the city has become a trendy way to attract audiences. Yet, it is precisely this trend that makes participatory art vulnerable to being used for purposes that are no longer related to participants' matters of concern. Hence, being taken advantage of by established art houses that only rely on them to tick off their 'participation box' is a role that respondents explicitly refuse to take on:

> *For them, [established Brussels art house], it was their participatory trip of the year. They landed here, they expected us to drop off a bus full of people, they charged back and they left again [...] Is this a lack of ambition, a lack of budget? There are undoubtedly reasons for this on their side as well, but this has made us think. We are not the participation whore of every organisation that wants three Moroccans in the audience! (R8-T2)*

> *Sometimes we received questions like 'we are looking for someone, a refugee, who came by boat...' I was like 'sorry, but this is not a casting agency for refugees with this or another story'. (R4-T5)*

Finally, respondents remain wary of creating new patterns of inclusion and exclusion themselves. In Brussels, the above described two-tier structure, marked by a financial

imbalance between the centre and the periphery, has recently been disturbed by processes of gentrification. This is reflected in new types of households, often young, trendy double-earners, settling in centrally located neighbourhoods with attractive housing and public spaces (e.g. Quartier Dansaert, Marolles neighbourhood, first ring in Saint-Gilles and Anderlecht, Place Flagey and Châtelain neighbourhood in Ixelles, Maritime neighbourhood in Molenbeek). A recent study by Goossens et al. (2020) showed how this process can lead to a new social mix in some neighbourhoods, yet increases the elitist character of the neighbourhood in others:

> *I absolutely refused to use the name 'summer bar' or 'pop up bar', that's much too decisive for the image. There are quite some trendy people living here too, therefore they are not rich, but they are trendy and I already can see them having drinks and then it's exclusively about them. (R12-T4)*

It is certainly not a new phenomenon that artists and cultural practices are identified as important actors in initiating gentrification processes. To a certain extent, this creative presence may be of benefit to a neighbourhood, though, as one of the respondents points out, there is always a risk of creating new exclusionary processes:

> *There was a beautiful painting by a group from Barcelona. Someone we know had used a compressor to put his name on it with bright blue paint. On Facebook I commented something like: 'well, it looks like people can't stand beauty'. Then someone of our volunteers said: 'yes, but the city also belongs to those who live at night'. Now, I think that is something very activist because a beautiful mural is a harbinger of: 'I'm not going to be able to pay the rent here eventually'. First an art gallery, then a coffee bar... (R12-T2).*

To whom shall this city belong? Social solidarity in a post-national context

Since the socio-spatial structure of a city can no longer be captured by national integration models, it has gradually become clear that urban living requires a different perspective, both in terms of culture and its role in social bonding. In Brussels, which we described as a preeminent post-national context, the need for a new register of social coherence became painfully evident

after the 2016 attacks, leaving many social and cultural organisations dejected, as the polarisation within society suddenly took sharp shape.[2] Especially for participatory arts practices in Molenbeek this has been a hard blow (R9, R22). With the involvement of several residents and the locating of Salah Abdeslam's hiding place, any nuanced image of the municipality has seemed to disappear. However, in reaction to preconceived ideas of violence and disconnection, several counter initiatives were set up to propose another image of the city. As one of the respondents puts it, the attacks have definitely contributed to the search for a Brussels identity, in the cultural field as well, not by taking on its role as a reference system for collective identity formation, but by reclaiming urbanity (R11). The essence of this urbanity lies neither in a Flemish community building in Brussels, nor in a French-speaking cultural sector that has not fully outgrown the dominance of the French language, but in intercultural production and the hybrid outcome of differences in proximity:

> *The strength of Brussels is that there is no one to take over [...] The Flemish can make a fuss, but there are five of them. The French-speakers are fewer every day and they realize that they do not longer have the powerful position they used to have in the city. The foreign forces are increasing [...] That makes it interesting. (R8-T2)*

Taking the actual lifeworld of participants as a frame of reference, participatory arts practices are more plural than any representation of the city can render. As such, they have a pioneering role in opening up dominant cultural regimes that are built on a discourse of national history and are therefore a reduction of complexity:

> *I think participation is a crucial way of achieving social cohesion because people become co-owners of an institution in their neighbourhood, rather than just a stranded spaceship where they walk around. If people feel co-ownership, then the level of involvement is higher. If you don't work in a participatory way,*

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[2] On March 22, 2016, three suicide bombings took place in Brussels: two at Brussels Airport, and one at the Maelbeek metro station. Thirty-two citizens were killed, over 300 people were injured. The perpetrators belonged to a terrorist cell that had been involved in the November 2015 Paris attacks.

decisions are made from your own frame of reference and that's an important frame of reference, but it
cannot reflect the complexity of Brussels. (R3-T4)

Although the above respondent uses the word social cohesion, most respondents are careful in describing (new) social connections that may arise through participatory arts practices. One of the artists explains his sensitivity to the concept, which is currently a popular policy term, since it often reflects a rather quantitative approach of the social (R18). In the quote below, another artist adds that he sees little point in perspectives that revolve around the question 'how many people'.

If an artist did a street performance with 100 children and 98 children just drew stripes on the ground
and only two children realized that the words they were saying were important. Did the process fail
because 98 children were just drawing stripes? (R14-T1)

Beyond this quantitative impact however, the concrete interference in the relations between people, is a question that preoccupies many participatory arts practices. The composition of urban population is constantly changing. By taking urbanity as a scoop for cultural production participatory arts practices cannot but remain open to different forms of involvement. As such, gathering people around concrete urban issues may have a more transitional dimension. Though, this does not render these temporary coalitions less meaningful:

You don't build a community by doing a six-month project [...] That's why the strength of our projects is
that they take place in the context of an open art house and that there is something before the project, as
well as afterwards, but without any obligation. (R4-T5)

All those questions about urban living bother us a lot, because we do a project in the public space, but
the concrete project is only one day [...] So how can we make sure we leave something behind? For the
moment, it comes from the encounters we make, which means that if, within a project, people who are
less precarious meet people who are more precarious, they might be a bit more considerate of each other
for a moment, that's perhaps what we stand for. (R23-T3)

What these temporary coalitions moreover reveal is that urban living is not only about strong types of belonging – *'you don't build community in a six-month project'* – but also about more ambiguous forms of urban belonging. According to the following respondents, these often more subtle, ambivalent social bonds are precisely what participatory arts practices allow for. In the quote below, one of them refers to a theatre project with refugees and people in precarious situations, which was quite intensive, but limited in duration. Though the project did not necessarily lead to deep friendships, the respondent stressed that for many participants this means that they were at least recognized by someone else in the city:

> *I don't know if you can speak of social cohesion, but it is extremely important in a city, that when you walk around or go to the supermarket, you meet at least one person you can say hello to. (R4-T5)*

As one of the artists explains, this is also reflected in the expectations from which you start a project. Producing a performance with well-known actors might attract more audiences, but the small exchanges that take place throughout a participatory project are often more meaningful:

> *You have to believe that in the littleness of encounters with people who are not necessarily [...] That is the strength of participatory work, that the result is sometimes spectacular in its littleness. (R7-T1)*

Discussion: In search for new societal metaphors

Present-day societies have become undeniably more urban (Corijn, 2009). In this article, we shed light on the social pedagogical mandate of participatory arts practices, which, alongside many other (social) practices and sectors, are confronted with the question what constitutes social bonds in such a context. For the strong increase of inhabitants from different cultural backgrounds has been accompanied with the realisation that urban living no longer finds a basis in a shared set of norms and values (Oosterlynck et al., 2016). Hence, cities not only appear at the forefront in creating economic surplus, but also in producing new societal metaphors, i.e. notions of social solidarity that go beyond national discourses. While in this vein the growing

popularity of participatory arts practices in the urban fabric has led to ambitious and often uncontested claims, this article returns to the core of their mandate by exploring how practitioners intervene in the relation between individual and society.

Drawing on the Brussels context, which we presented as a case of post-national urbanity, our findings reveal that challenges associated with urbanity do not affect all urban actors equally. The dichotomy between the western crescent-shaped zone and the more affluent eastern municipalities provides the city with a marked socio-economic geography. Even though the composition of these ingrained socio-spatial patterns is specific to Brussels, the general pattern in which particular (groups of) inhabitants are less entitled to participate in the urban dialogue, is familiar to all urban researchers (Atkinson & Bridge, 2005). In face of this socio-economic reality, we nevertheless observed how participatory art emanates from the recognition that fundamental questions about urban living cannot be addressed without reference to those who are most adversely affected by the current changes (e.g. people living in poverty, refugees, people failing to find a connection to the labour market). As such, in every act of intervention practitioners address not just private troubles, but treat them in relation to public issues and hence are engaged in what Lorenz (2016) describes as an act of *'social policy making'* (p.13). However, the precarity of some participants painfully reveals that participatory art cannot simply fill all gaps in areas from which the government has withdrawn social services. In line with this, Gielen (2019) has criticized the fact that participatory arts practices are offered as a compensation for the breakdown of social infrastructure. In practice, this presents practitioners with a difficult dilemma: on the one hand, it undermines the artistic process and the critical potential of their practices, on the other hand, they are fully aware that these participants often have nowhere else to turn to.

When it comes to participation, the critical attitude of practitioners – *'we are not participation whores'* – reveals how smaller, innovative practices are at risk of being exploited

by the consolidated cultural institutions. In earlier research, we have illustrated how cultural policymakers, acting from an instrumental focus on the social and economic impact of arts and culture, described by Belfiore and Bennett (2007) as the *'cult of the measurable'*, emphasize participation as an important criterion for funding (see Dewinter et al., 2020). The fact that bigger art institutions dare to rely on participatory arts practices to tick off their 'participation box' in order to pass *'the participation police'* (Rutten et al, 2018, p.271) may not be surprising in that respect. Nonetheless, new metaphors for urban living are rather produced in the margins of the official cultural sector, in participatory arts practices that 'breathe' urbanity and therefore can evolve in unpredictable and ambiguous ways.

The fragmentation of the Brussels institutional context renders the search for new registers of social cohesion far from evident. Moreover, the 2016 attacks have provided the city with a critical case in relation to questions of belonging. As our findings reveal, participatory arts practices allow for social bonds that are often more superficial and temporary than so-called 'strong' types of belonging upon which national discourses are traditionally built. While the latter refers to a more or less cohesive community defined by geographical or cultural boundaries, Reyskens (2016, p.1) describes the former as *'a form of urban togetherness in which participants and spectators are exposed to each other in a practice that does not necessarily lead to identification and shared meaning'.* Rather, urban living gives rise to a sense of belonging that is more volatile and context-specific. It implies multiple relational ramifications in which the togetherness may be dissolved again. Soenen (2006) in that respect refers to an everyday process of *'stich and split'*.

Particularly in our Brussels case, where the collective imagination still resides in the hands of the Communities, it is noticeable that we found these temporary and more 'weak' social bonds in all layers of the participatory arts scene. Hence, the essence of urban living appears to lie neither in Flemish community building, nor in a Francophone culture as the

common ground for all Brussels' citizens, but rather in the *'littleness of encounters',* not with what is already known and familiar to us, yet with a set of meanings that are different and unknown. In line with this, Deceur et al. (2016) argue that the meaning of participatory art's *"quirky contrariness in society and arts is often more important than its scale"* (p. 372). Exactly here lies the social pedagogical potential of participatory arts practices, i.e. in the creation of these temporary shared (new) experiences, meanings and memories. This implies that the little encounters before, during or after a participatory arts project are not only meaningful on a personal level, but also on a social level. By moving beyond dominant (art) forms and questioning why certain things are done and presented in a certain way, participatory art can become critical of existing power relations (Deceur et al., 2016) and give rise to transformative assumptions about what post-national belonging and solidarity could involve (Petersen & Nielsen, 2021). By not starting from the identification with a common group, community, language, culture or nation, but from the actual presence of differences in proximity, they produce societal metaphors that may sound more humble and temporary, but also less conditional – and in that sense are crucial in a society that is becoming increasingly urban. Of course, clashes of interests in this urban sphere are unavoidable (Lorenz, 2016). Brussels' gentrifying neighbourhoods are a clear example of this. In this respect, practitioners often play a mediating role, as the search for a new register of social cohesion under the conditions of urbanity can only be meaningful when it is based on processes of negotiation between all urban actors – especially those who are most affected by these conditions.

Urban cultural policies in Europe are facing a process of radical rescaling. Within that process, participatory arts practices seem to thrive well. With this paper we have sought to demonstrate why the Brussels context constitutes an important focus in the post-national debate. Moreover, we aim to put forward the construction of new societal metaphors as an important means of understanding the multiplicity of these practices.

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