Sustaining Urban Public Spaces through Everyday Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism: the Case of the Art Center Recyclart

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Abstract

This article explores how social artistic interventions provide forms of everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism – an intellectual and aesthetic openness towards objects, places, experiences, activities that relates to the everyday life of people regardless of identity, occupation, social class, cultural/racial background, and lifestyle – in transforming urban voids into inclusive urban public spaces. Through socially engaged art, artists and artistic institutions do not play a leading role but act as facilitators to provide space and context for events to emerge. Through participant observations and interviews for the period 2015-2018 and using concepts of everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism, we demonstrate how the art center Recyclart, through socially informed artistic interventions, practices, and performances, contributed to transforming urban voids into inclusive urban public spaces. Our results indicate that local life, enacted by so-called marginalized residents and their everyday practices in urban central neighborhoods, is critical in city-making and contributes to everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism.

Keywords

Everyday Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism; Social Artistic Intervention; Urban Voids; Urban Public Spaces; Recyclart

Introduction

In this article we study the processes of everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism through the case of an art center. Following Robbins (1998), we do not conceive cosmopolitanism as a universal elitist project but rather constituted by transnational experiences and border-crossings that are localized, particular, plural and unprivileged. In a similar vein, everyday aesthetics (Saito 2007; 2019) focuses on the aesthetic potential of everyday mundane life worlds of so-called ordinary people, particularly silenced and unprivileged publics, and thus less concerned with elite-centered aesthetics and cosmopolitanism research. It echoes the social turn in aesthetics (Bourriaud 2002) that increasingly has become involved with social events, public and civic engagement since the 1990s (Bennett 2012; Bishop 2006a; Finkelpearl 2000; Kester, 2011; Korza et al. 2005; Lacy, 1995). In studying the role of art, artists, art institutions, and reception of art in urban public spaces and development, we blend the two concepts into everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism.

We then apply the new concept to the art center Recyclart that is located in marginal inner-city neighborhoods of Brussels. We explore both the possibilities and vulnerabilities and potential pitfalls in transforming urban voids into inclusive public spaces through socially informed artistic interventions, practices, and performances. Based on ethnographic observations and interviews along with literature study we aspire to understand how local life embodied by marginalized residents in their everyday practices is shaping the city and thus contributing to everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism. How do social artistic interventions foster everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism in transforming urban voids into inclusive urban public spaces and thus contributing to city making? How is this process mediated through collaborative initiatives between art centers and local residents, with a special attention to the so-called more vulnerable groups of the neighborhoods? How sustainable and what are the potential pitfalls of these social artistic endeavors?

In order to address these questions this article is organized in three parts: literature review, methodology, in-depth discussion of everyday aesthetic cosmopolitan activities initiated by the art center Recyclart in Brussels. In the first part we critically review the academic literature on cosmopolitanism and everyday aesthetics in the context of sustaining urban public spaces when confronted with increasing urban voids. Then we proceed to elaborate the research methodologies in studying practices of socially engaged art transforming urban voids into inclusive urban public spaces. In the third part we showcase initiatives on how social artistic interventions provide forms of everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism (Di Paola 2018; Guasch 2018; Saito 2019) in transforming urban voids into inclusive urban public spaces at the Brussels-based art center Recyclart. We end with a conclusion assessing the outcomes in terms of possibilities and threats.

Everyday Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism through Art in Urban Voids

Following early scholars' inquiry of everyday aesthetics from various perspectives (Berleant 1970, 1991, 2005; Dewey 1958; Mandoki 2007), Saito focuses on the rich content of everyday events, settings, activities in mundane life worlds regarding items and qualities that are ordinary, commonplace and routine yet omnipresent in daily life transcending individual and cultural differences (Saito 2007; 2019). In other words, Saito (2017; 2019) refers to the interaction between the individual and the space, understanding subjectivity as inter-subjectivity involving inter-body engagements and entanglements at multiple levels of interaction.

Cosmopolitanism refers to contemporary artistic effort of responsibility and hospitality 'towards a more global and intercultural dimension' (Di Paola 2018, p. 12), of contextualization of social, political, spatial and urban realities, and of acting and effecting a work in progress in exploring transculturation and hybridization (Chakrabarty et al. 2002). This is echoed by Robbins (1998) arguing that cosmopolitanism should not be conceived as an overarching universal elitist project but rather constituted by transnational experiences and border-crossings that are localized, particular, plural and unprivileged.

These two streams of concepts are inspirational when applied to the role of art, artists and art institutions and the reception of art in urban public spaces. Everyday aesthetics cultivates an aesthetic attitude allowing the self and others to have a transcending experience with the (urban) ordinary life and routine and at the same time it rewards any (urban) mundane objects and routine an aesthetic merit (Gumbrecht 2006; Leddy 2012; Tuan 1993; Visser 1997). Thus, it encourages a post-structural position instead of a fixed attitude to distinguish between familiar and unfamiliar, ordinary and extraordinary (Haapala 2017; Potgieter 2017). De-familiarizing the familiar and the mundane dimension of ordinary urban life allows for unleashing the aesthetic potential of so-called ordinary people and their interventions in the urban fabric. It opens new possibilities for creating alternative art forms, artistic interventions, and contemporary avant-garde art. In so doing it foregrounds the salience of everyday urban life in the creation of art(s) following the social turn in the art world that has become increasingly entangled with social events, and public and civic engagement since 1990s (Bennett 2012; Bishop 2006a; Finkelpearl 2000; Kester 2011; Korza et al. 2005; Lacy 1995).

Secondly, everyday aesthetics questions the strict distinction between life and art (Potgieter 2017; Saito 2019) and thus gives rise to a 'creative, educable, transformative reciprocity between art and life' (Potgieter 2017, p. 72). In this sense, artists and art institutions that are committed to social engagement with everyday urban (neighborhood) life blur the creator/spectator dichotomy as they foster collaborative projects with the public in locally embedded art projects and events through co-creation. Thus, the role of the artist and art institution have evolved from a mere creator to a facilitator providing a context or an occasion for things to emerge, while promoting palpable human interactions both within and beyond the local community. As facilitators, artists/artistic institutions/curators employ action-oriented means of art and artistic production encouraging active engagement and involvement from the public that sustain the publicness of urban space and authenticity as origin and past history as well as creativity and future-oriented possibility (Zukin 2010) of the city.

Thirdly, artists and art institutions create the context of multi-sensory ambiance for subjects to experience the aesthetics of a vibe (Böhme 1993; Böhme & Thibaud 2018) where a 'unified atmosphere arises spontaneously when various elements making up the physical environment and human interactions and movements within it happen to congeal' with 'objectively identifiable features of the environment and situation' (Saito 2019) in urban public spaces. These multi-sensory experiences redistribute the senses to the non-visual such as olfactory, tactile, gustatory, auditory sensations. They also reshuffle the urban sensorium by making visible the unheard voices (instead of noises) of the often silenced and hidden groups (Dikeç 2005; Rancière 2004) which tend to be eclipsed by the visual orientation and the senses from the established spatial and social order in fields such as urban planning and architectural design. From this perspective the multi-sensory ambiance provides contexts for encounters of bodily engagement and human interactions including but not limited to open-mindedness to diversities, respect and reciprocity (Berleant 2005b; 2012; 2017). Moreover, these encounters initiate moments of interruption 'of the "natural" order of domination' by constituting a common space for those who usually 'have no part in that order' (Dikeç 2005, p. 172). In this sense, the multi-sensory encounters with redistributed sensorium in the urban public spaces become political where equality emerges (Dikeç 2005).

From these premises, we propose the concept of everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism in exploring the role of socially engaged art, artist and art institution and reception of art in urban public spaces and relationship between *everyday* art and the urban space. Everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism (Di Paola 2018; Guasch 2018; Meskimmon 2011; Saito 2019) represents an intellectual and aesthetic openness towards objects, places, experiences and activities that constitutes urban *everyday* life of people regardless of identity, occupation, social class, cultural background or lifestyle. It is 'immersed in the routine and mundane' (Olcese & Savage 2015, p. 721). It contrasts with the more elite centered air-travelling, globalizing and neoliberal form of fine art aesthetics and cosmopolitanism discourse (Olcese & Savage 2015; Saito 2017, 2019). Instead, everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism advocates for the localized, particular, plural and unprivileged

(Robbins 1998) cosmopolitan experiences. In so doing it attends to the indeterminate, unestablished, mundane and embodied engagement in urban everyday life worlds. It encourages an openness to explore openings and interstices affording shared alternative experiences and perspectives. In addition, this endeavor necessitates collaboration with the general public, especially with so-called marginalized residents, and redistribution of the urban sensorium (Dikeç 2005; Rancière 2004), which is less concerned by the elite-centered aesthetics and cosmopolitanism, promoting encounters with everyday mundane and localized activities in the urban context as presented in the following parts of this paper.

As the dynamic and dialectic processes of everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism are grounded in socially engaged art, it is useful to briefly discuss this strand of art. The nature of socially engaged art is community-oriented and collaborative. These participatory artistic practices engage with a specific group of people living in a specific locality socially, culturally (Cartiere 2016) and spatially. It is therefore deeply entrenched in the place with a (growing) understanding of the place's historical, social, and political context. By working with people in specific sites, socially engaged art has the potential to facilitate a negotiation with top-down urban spatial orderings and provide alternative horizons for urban imagines towards urban public spaces and inclusive city-making. Given this impact, socially engaged art has political potential (Olsen 2018) in urban spatial negotiations. Through socially engaged artistic interventions in urban voids, artists and art institutions reflect and act upon urban social realities of multi-scalar conflicts, offering a theoretical basis for everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism, epistemologically and in real life spaces, to debate about topics including globalization, urbanization, gentrification, migration, identity, authenticity, and inclusion. From a practical perspective, it aims at finding positive, responsible, and sustainable solutions to (re)create relationships between people of various groups, between people and urban space. The theoretical expansion towards social relations (Bourriaud 2002) has driven art to develop beyond commercialized and object-based ontology (Bishop 2006b). However, it has also been subject to criticism. Firstly, it fails to examine, measure and compare the quality of relationships produced by socially engaged art (Bishop 2004; 2012). Secondly, prioritizing social effect might undermining artistic quality and artistic evaluation (Bishop 2006b) thus leading to difficulties 'to determine what…constitutes the aesthetic content' of socially engaged art (Kester 2011, p. 30). Moreover, socially engaged art might also raise issues including, but not limited to, gentrification, instrumentalization and vulnerability.

The everyday dimension in our proposed concept of everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism should be understood in two levels of interpretations. Firstly, it refers to the 'real world encounters' (Bennett 2012; Patel 2018) in everyday life aesthetics of urban inhabitants. This orientation provides the context for socially engaged artists to explore possibilities in co-creating artistic projects with urban residents and in line with their authentic and dynamic life worlds. It also explores the complex yet inseparable and interconnected relationship between art and society. The second level indicates the everyday spatial and material domain of urban environment, particularly urban voids and its transformative potential for marginal urban space. On the one hand, empty and underused spaces in the urban context are often associated with undesirable metaphors such as ruins, wasteland and lost space (Simon & Mseddi 2020; Trancik 1986) that should be addressed, prevented or removed. On the other hand, urban voids are considered as containers of the lived history of the city providing welcomed perspectives from the contemporary reality of density disconnected from the past. They become places of possibility and resources for social and ecological transformation, and spaces to be transformed into urban commons, connecting inhabitants from the past with their counterparts at present and in the future (Accordino & Johnson 2000; Chang 2018; Di Giovanni 2018; Németh & Langhorst 2014; Overmeyer 2007). This recent attention for the material and spatial realm adds a new dimension to the social turn in aesthetics (Bourriaud 2002) prioritizing social relations while overlooking the material realm. This may create an opposition between social (the primary focus of relational aesthetics) and the material and by extension the spatial (overlooked in relational aesthetics). Such an opposition may also risk regarding material as incapable of changing and evolving. It may also undermine the

interdependence of material and social (Olsen 2018). Therefore, we made the critical choice to connect the dots between the social and the material in understanding everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism in the urban context. We endorse the notion of adaptive reuse (Galdini 2019) of the indeterminate urban spatial voids as means of weaving an urban fabric tapestry (Haas & Locke 2018), replenishing and sustaining public spaces, while tentatively exploring the urban circular paradigm (Ghisellini et al. 2016).

Methodology: the Ethnography of Scenes

Empirically the art center Recyclart in Brussels has become the site of investigation using ethnography across two sites in triangulation with the literature review. As it blends art with music, social economy and reviving marginal urban places we obtain our methodological inspiration from the ethnography of scenes (Glass 2012; Pfadenhauer 2005) with a particular focus on actions, or 'doing scene' (Glass 2012) and viewing the urban life world as a process (Low 1996).

From a temporal perspective, the fieldwork was developed in three stages from early 2015 to the end of 2018, following Recyclart's three stages during the time of our fieldwork, namely stable residence at Chapelle Station, liminal and unstable exploration due to sudden forced eviction, and rebirth and new beginning at a new site. The first stage was from early 2015 to October 2017. After an initial phase of entering the field through a gatekeeper who introduced us to the Recyclart team, we familiarized ourselves through regular and frequent visits coinciding with the daily daytime office routines of the Recyclart production team, and regular evening and weekend events at various hosting places including events at the Chapelle train station and numerous meeting places in the Marol neighborhood. During this period, we were able to collect data reliably by frequent participation and observation in the alternative art scene thanks to the regular nature of the events and hosting places. We regularly attended Recyclart's art exhibitions, concerts, and urban debates on city life and urban design. We also participated in three editions of the annual six-week Summer Festival activities including concerts, live wrestling, public pizza and bread baking workshops. Moreover, we frequently participated in a wide range of activities at the neighborhood level, joining projects for and from the residents of the Marolles. The second stage was from January 2018 to June 2018, a period when Recyclart experienced forced eviction from the Chapelle Station of Brussels. Due to the unstable and liminal nature of this period, we witnessed and documented the process of the eviction, including Recyclart's negotiation and communication with various urban stakeholders, organizing eviction resistance music events, packing for the eviction, temporary sheltering at an empty office while looking for a new hosting place through visiting various abandoned urban buildings. In addition, we also participated in academic debates about displacement of urban artistic and cultural institutions. Furthermore, we collected data on virtual scenes (Bennett 2002a; Kibby 2000) that primarily occurred on the social media platform Facebook where Recyclart supporters actively debated and articulated their disagreement on the forced eviction while emphasizing the importance of Recyclart to the everyday urban life and urban public spaces of Brussels. The third stage we observed was the rebirth of Recyclart from June 2018 to December 2018 at the new location, a former printing factory covering approximately 4000 m² of empty, abandoned building in the municipality of Molenbeek, of Brussels. During this period, we participated and observed how Recyclart has transformed an urban void to an art center and how it was gradually accepted, or not, by long-time and new visitors as well as residents from the new surrounding neighborhood. We also observed drastic change and replacement of Recyclart team members impacted from the eviction and the rebirth of the center in another location.

During the participant observation, or afterwards given the nightlife nature of most events, we wrote up fieldwork notes. Furthermore, we carried out semi-structured (sometimes repeated) interviews with Recyclart team members, interlocutors from municipal institutions and active residents from surrounding neighborhoods. In addition, we collected data from spontaneous conversations and informal interviews with

event participants at first hand. At different stages of the fieldwork, we discussed, analyzed and coded the collected data while concurrently proceeding with fieldwork data collection. We developed descriptive and analytical understandings of approaches and possible patterns of the art scenes created by Recyclart and presented and discussed our ethnographic findings and conceptual developments derived from data analysis at various academic debates and conferences, which further inspired our subsequent observations and analyses.

Everyday Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism: The Case of Recyclart

CONTEXTUALIZING RECYCLART AND ITS SURROUNDINGS

Recyclart was created in 1996 as a non-profit organization combining artistic, cultural and community activities, urban design projects and social economic training programs. From 1996 to 2018, Recyclart was primarily resident in the abandoned Chapelle train station, a small municipal station on the railway link between the North-South junction in Brussels which has caused a spatial scar, turning this inner-city area into a wasteland. Many buildings were demolished and as a result the urban fabric of different neighborhoods was deeply disrupted. The railway line was constructed in 1952 to link the previously disconnected North and South station in Brussels. The 1960s was a time when intensive urban change and massive development projects were undertaken to meet the Fordist model of modernization in Brussels. Before the arrival of Recyclart with a European Union subsidy, the area was underused and the surrounding areas were spaces of 'no man's land' with notorious reputations. The subway space and tunnel were fully covered with graffiti sprays and had no lighting during the night. No one wanted to step into this wasteland. With Recyclart the neighborhood started to change. The Recyclart model of art plus social economy organized art activities, as well as training programs for socially vulnerable groups through social economy. Recyclart was divided in three sub-organizations: the art center, Fabrik and Bar Recyclart. The art center produces artistic programs including music, photography, architecture and planning, visual art, film and video, graphics, and community projects. Fabrik has three workshops, namely wood, metal, and technics, combining urban design and urban furniture production with professional transition programs. It targets former detainees who faced difficulties finding a job in the regular labor market. Bar Recyclart produces quality food and promoted vegetarian/vegan cuisines hiring long-time low-skilled unemployed people.

Recyclart engages in underground artistic-social activities. The property of underground entails both a literal and more figurative dimension. From a physical point of view, it is located under the railway tracks, so that it can hardly be noticed by 'aboveground' passengers and trains but also the audience of the venue is constantly reminded of its underground position as the sounds of roaring trains passing above the venue reverberated during activities. From an artistic perspective, the center seeks unnoticed grass-root level artists or those in an early stage of their career affording them the freedom to explore their imaginations before their 'discovery' by mainstream cultural institutions. It therefore invites edgy and at times sensitive and controversial performances to attract alternative audiences. Although it receives state subsidies Recyclart maintains its countercultural position aligning with informal activities. From a social perspective, 'underground' aligns with accessibility and low threshold as it provides free entrance to most, if not all, events and activities to the economically under-privileged social groups.

REAL LIFE ENCOUNTERS

To better understand how everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism comes into being, we focus on the following two socially engaged art projects initiated by the photographer Vincen Beeckman.

Background of the art project: TV Marol

This project refers to a television and live show program co-produced by Recyclart's social artist and photographer, Vincen Beeckman, and its technical team with local residents of the Marol neighborhood. The aim of TV Marol was to give a voice and a forum to the residents of the neighborhood to showcase their mundane and embodied way of life in the local community. They call themselves 'Maroliens' embracing values and habits that resist middle-class neoliberal standards. They cherish their working-class way of life and the own local aesthetics. They frequent local shops instead of chain stores and support local cafés and bars. They reject standard beauty norms and mainstream sartorial styles. In practice local volunteers and residents co-produced and performed in a live show representing everyday life of the neighborhood in close cooperation with Recyclart. These volunteers organized their own meetings in selecting topics, making appointments to interview local residents, matching costumes, inviting local residents to be on the stage, producing theatrical props, and in so doing acquiring a wide range of skills. As amateurs they managed to continue this project from 2008 until the end of 2017. It was a daunting task as they had to overcome innumerable constraints ranging from limited budget, space and time schedule conflicts and miscommunications. In the process of making the films about local everyday mundane life encounters they had the chance to forge closer ties and gain a deeper knowledge of the neighborhood. A platform with multi-sensory experiences and redistributed urban sensorium (Dikeç 2005; Rancière 2004) was created in making audible otherwise unheard voices and enabling often less visible groups to share their local way of life with a wider public beyond the neighborhood. All the while they had full freedom and control on what and how to present TV Marol.

Given the background of the linguistic diversity of Brussels with the official languages of French and Dutch, the show resolutely opted for the local dialect of the neighborhood, a mix of Flemish dialect with French and Spanish loanwords. A local multilingual couple, named Pey (meaning little boy) and Mey (little girl, from the Dutch word 'meisje') acted as TV Marol hosts. The show documented local daily life, with particular attention to how the local elderly sustained the specific mood and spirit of this popular quarter and how local meeting places played a key role in nurturing thick social ties. In this way, TV Marol created a common space for those who were usually less visible in the dominant social order, therefore demonstrating a sense of social equality (Dikeç 2005). With this character, it attracted both long-time and new residents to become linked to and (re)attached to the neighborhood via participating and co-creating TV Marol thus sustaining long-lasting relationships between people and between people and urban spaces.

Impact of the art project

One member of the production team, Mr. A., a French man in his mid-thirties, decided to extend his stay in the neighborhood because of the show. Before residing in this neighborhood, he tended to move to another country every three to five years. Besides his regular job as a French teacher, he devoted most if not all his energy to TV Marol, participating in the meetings with the production team, making short films about TV Marol, hand-crafting advertisements for TV Marol, and hosting part of the live performance of TV Marol. TV Marol became an important part of his life and afforded him a special attachment with the residents and the neighborhood. As the female host of TV Marol, born and bred in the Marol, commented:

> *Everybody wanted to show the best of him/herself and be somebody else in the show. When doing TV Marol we can be crazy and it works. It's a fantasy world that I get into and for free. I enjoy myself a lot. I don't know if they know it but they [Recyclart] did a lot to keep the spirit, a kind of spirit [of the neighborhood], to keep people together. [Researcher asks, 'What is this spirit?'] I think it's about bonding together against the big city and trying to have a good life. This is a little town against the rich city. They did a lot of social work that helps to mix the old and new spirit. TV Marol is from Marolles…(it's) for the*

poor and (those from) the Brussels, the real ones. (Ms. B., Belgian female, early forties, freelancer media production, volunteer and host of TV Marol from 2008 to 2017).

Through de-familiarizing the familiar mundane ordinary inner-city life in TV Marol's live shows, it unleashed the aesthetic potential of ordinary people, acknowledging and encouraging their interventions in the urban fabric. Together the TV Marol volunteers created events for the neighborhood and explored the meaning of their own neighborhood. By interviewing residents, visiting different homes, and meeting places of the neighborhood, both indoor and outdoor, they co-created a deep connection among the members of the production team and with the neighborhood. Through producing and interacting with local residents they construed a locally embedded and collective identity. They explored local social world settings, 'drawing from and influencing nearby' (Glass 2012, p. 697). In this sense, the production, performance, and consumption of TV Marol represented a micro-level process of local members creating collectively theatrical and at times voyeuristic scenes of the everyday life of this neighborhood for both local and non-local people. In so doing they sustained a local social world of constant becoming (Garfinkel 1967) while blurring the distinction between life and art (Potgieter 2017; Saito 2019) that can be communicated and appreciated by consumers across social classes of cultural activities for it affords audiences a chance to be 'closer to local life' (R. British female tourist, mid-twenties). 'It made me laugh with them (the performers and the audiences) although I don't always understand their language and jokes' (Ms. M., Belgian female graphic designer and freelancer, mid-forties). The socially engaged project TV Marol provided a context for social relationships to emerge, evolve and (re)attach while promoting palpable human interactions both within and beyond the local community.

Background of the art project: photobook of Claude and Lilly

Another example of everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism is the photographic book project of the couple Claude and Lilly by the same artist. It narrates the romance of a homeless elderly couple in the Marol until the tragic death of Lilly in 2018. Claude met Lilly in July 1995. He saved her from her former violent partner, and they formed a couple for 23 years, during which for more than 10 years they were roaming the streets of Brussels as homeless people. After multiple visits, drinking and eating with them, Beeckman gradually gained their trust and consent to be part of a book project, for which he took photographs of cherished and important moments of their life together. Some of the captured life moments have resulted in the book 'Claude and Lilly' documenting intimate, happy and tragic times together from 2015 until the sorrowful passing away of Lilly in 2018. The book shows us a glimpse of a couple deeply in love with each other: snuggling, kissing, exchanging endearing glances, taking care of each other in everyday life. The book and the images of Claude and Lilly are so strikingly authentic and uncompromising – as it shows the harshness of homelessness blended with intimacy and genuine love – that it triggers an aesthetic experience (Gumbrecht 2006; Leddy 2012; Tuan 1993; Visser 1997). The small vignettes of Claude and Lilly's togetherness was welcomed by the frequent visitors of Recyclart because of the universality of love and tenderness in ordinary life, as is shown in the following comments:

Focusing on a homeless couple is unusual but genuine. Most photos [from nowadays] are about posing, make, up, showing perfection. This work is not like that. It gives space and voice to people. [It's] like a bridge. A friend of mine bought a photo of Claude and Lilly and she hangs it in her apartment. She loves it. They [the photos] show real life. (Ms. C., Belgian female, late twenties, frequent visitor to Recyclart).

The material and visual articulation of this love story of ordinary less-privileged people that otherwise would not have been noticed let alone thematized, fosters a 'creative, educable, transformative reciprocity between art and life' (Potgieter 2017, p. 72). The social engagement approach in attending to everyday life and art in everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism encourages an intellectual and aesthetic openness towards places and experiences of people regardless of identity, occupation, social class, cultural background or lifestyle.

Moreover, the gaze is turned towards the localized, particular, unprivileged ([Robbins 1998](#)) mundane and embodied engagement in urban everyday life worlds of people and places that remain otherwise unnoticed and untold. This may not change the city and the world directly. These worlds may, however, leave a deep imprint on the general public's perception, attitude and worldview that might gradually impact the perceptions and actions of people when engaging in the city and the world in a long-term perspective. This socially engaged art book project does not prioritize social effect over artistic quality ([Bishop 2006b](#)). Instead, it managed to a high degree to keep a balance between the two properties. This might explain its positive reception in various media, art, and cultural institutions at different scales from the local to the global. As an art book it is not only recognized, appreciated, and widely reported in the national but also in the international press. It was featured on Vogue Italia April 1st of 2019 as a beautiful love story. More recently it was also highly acclaimed in the art section of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung of March 4, 2022. Moreover, Fotomuseum Antwerp, also known as FOMU, the most important Photography Museum in Flanders Belgium, recently purchased some pictures from the Claude and Lilly series to be included in their permanent collection.

Both art projects are manifestly socially engaged art that is community-oriented and based on collaboration and co-creation. They also enact the processes of everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism as the familiar is being defamiliarized. We are invited to look beyond the blandness, banality and *tristesse* of the lives of marginalized groups in society. Instead, we encounter generosity and humor in TV Marol live show and deep human feelings of love and dedication of an ordinary couple as testified in the art book project Claude and Lilly. In both art projects the boundary between art and social life has been suspended and they elicit in varying degrees a multi-sensorial experience on the part of the audience.

However, one main vulnerability of socially engaged art approach is that it is person driven. When one of the many stakeholders –be it the artist or the disappearance of a local resident or the demise of the art center - is evacuated in the making process of artistic interventions, it abruptly brings an end to the co-creation process. One might raise the question of instrumentalization of the life story of Claude and Lilly by the artist photographer. However, the relationship of trust that the latter had developed with the couple over a long period of time and the careful attention to present them as lovable persons unveils an approach of respect and co-creation rather than an instant commodification of a homeless couple to cater to the insatiable appetites of the high middle class for the raw and the dark sides of society.

EVERYDAY SPATIAL AND MATERIAL DIMENSIONS IN AN URBAN ENVIRONMENT

While mainly conceived as a co-creation between the artist and local residents, everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism may also be expanded to the spatial dimension of the urban environment, with a particular interest for urban voids and its transformative potential in provoking new perspectives on urban public spaces. We focus here on the resistance movement to the eviction of Recyclart from its underground premises in a former urban void. The 36-hour music event in February 2018 was interspersed with online debates critically rejecting the forced eviction from Chapelle Station. Recyclart was active in this space for 20 years. With the political and cultural policy support from the European Union and the City of Brussels at the time for Brussels competing to be 2000 European Cultural Capital, a group of activists in Brussels submitted to the Urban Pilot Project the creation of the artistic center, Recyclart. Upon approval, Recyclart claimed the deserted space at Brussels Chapelle railway station in 1997 and transformed the urban voids into a creative, non-commercial and accessible-to-all alternative artistic space that offered "democratic parties at democratic prices" ([Declercq 2018](#)) through a combination of artistic and leisure activities, social economy programs and neighborhood approaches until it was forcefully evicted in March 2018 by the national railway company SNCB for fire safety reasons, which can be read as fear for terrorist acts as well as decreasing political support due to a changing urban political landscape in Brussels. To symbolically resist this eviction, the art center lunched an urban farewell party, lasting for 36-hours of non-stop music between

February 25 and February 26, 2018. Shortly after the announcement on its Facebook group page, it received more than 25,000 'interests' and more than 12,000 users signed up for participation. The mobilization through social media yielded success as a massive crowd showed up at the art venue, lining up and waiting to go inside to have a last experience in this specific location.

Despite the sub-zero temperature (it was -8°C), with no heating - as the gas supply was cut off after eviction - and the venue's limited capacity to host maximum 450 people inside, more than 200 individuals were queuing for an entrance ticket outside the venue on Feb 25 at 04:00 in the morning. The participants came to show their solidarity to Recyclart as well as protesting against the eviction. The indoor rules (such as no smoking and keeping the space clean) were deliberately neglected. People were dancing, drinking, smoking, and talking together. The venue was filled with a penetrating odor of urine, beer, weed and sweat. Sadness and anger filled the space as these short comments revealed from the fieldwork:

> *'It's so sad!... I'm angry... Like attending a funeral. You know?...It's a party but it's more like a funeral!'*

> *'They (The city authority and the railway company SNCB) just don't' understand! They don't know Recyclart! They don't know us!'*

The multi-sensory thickness and mixed sentiments of anger and sorrow were triggered by the teaming crowd of bodies, protesting, shouting, and mourning at the same time. The 36-hour event was abruptly stopped by the police at 5:00 in the morning, adding even more fuel to dissent and opposition including nonviolent sit-ins and street parties at the square outside of the station until the next day in the afternoon. On March 2, 2018, a self-organized street party named 'Free party with tears: support for Recyclart' (translated from French and Dutch) was coordinated online and facilitated a small group of some 20 individuals (wrapped in heavy winter clothes) having an evening outdoor music gathering in frosty temperature in front of the art center. In addition, a white banner with the subscript 'WE WANT YOU TO STAY!' was hung next to the logo of the art center and that of the railway station SNCB from the following day after the 36-hour event.

Aside from the physical manifestation of resistance, there was also a virtual forum created on Reyclart's Facebook page where people actively discussed the eviction and demonstrated their discontent by underlining the importance of Recyclart to the city and to their life. Prior to the eviction Facebook was mainly used as a tool for free and open circulation of information and promotion of its activities. Unlike many other group pages with followers throughout the world, the followers of Recyclart's Facebook group page were mainly people who had physically visited Recyclart. They understood the space, the artistic and cultural approach, and the neighborhood. As a reaction to Recyclart's first open letter of protest, the Facebook page of Recyclart received more than 1100 sad, angry, and tearful *emoji* faces, more than 100 comments and about 340 shares, articulating sentiments and resistance to the brutal and abrupt closure of the venue for allegedly security reasons of the Railway system:

> *'Dear Recyclart, you are too important for our city and 1000 young people and fewer young people who do not find their (artistic) taste elsewhere. You bonded with the Marol (residents) and with the new world movements…' (Translated from Recyclart's Facebook page comment, originally in Dutch).*

> *'Those men in the city don't understand. Recyclart is a monument you can't just move (Translated from Recyclart's Facebook page comment, originally in Dutch).*

> *'How to explain that there is no plan B pending the work or response of Infrabel and SNCB. I am very attached to Recyclart, a unique project of its kind in Brussels and very much appreciated!' (Translated from Recyclart's Facebook page comment, originally in French).*

One individual activist after writing a public letter to the city authorities posted it on Facebook individual user's page with the hashtag '#WEWANTYOUTOSTAY'. Within hours, it attracted a signing list of more than 550 supporting individuals and groups. The question in the letter reflected on what the art center stands for. It deplored the loss of alternative spaces in the city, protesting further decay of marginal urban neighborhoods under the railway and more generally combatting the norms and logic of capitalistic and commercial urban planning. Thus, the social movement triggered by the eviction of Recyclart sparked a wider political discussion about reducing growing urban inequality and in support of the need to construct alternative norms and community building for urban residents.

The virtual and live scenes of the eviction resistance movement fostered a deep connectedness among members from all walks of life through a locally rooted art center. This connectedness had strengthened the Recyclart community. Through its diverse programming the art center managed to create a sense of togetherness through a particular juxtaposition of socially engaged art, music, identity and place (Bennett 2002b).

The second example represents a new beginning with the emplacement of Recyclart in a new site. After the eviction in March 2018 the Recyclart team was forced to look for a new location. After a strenuous search of more than six months eventually an abandoned printing factory in the municipality of Molenbeek was found suitable to resurrect the old venue. In the building process the original structure was maintained as much as possible by only repairing the damaged façade and assigning new functions to existing spaces. The concept of recycling 'waste' into 'resources' was again applied in the re-use of the venue. Many new visitors showed appreciation for this practice of rejuvenating industrial heritage. The site is compelling to youngsters and hipsters with a preference for postmodern grit.

> *We noticed this [the unrepaired hole] when we were walking around upstairs in the exhibition room. It's covered by a blanket… Here they just let it be as how it is. There is a hole and it is visible. They don't try to hide it. It's so Brussels [his finger pointing to the hole on the ceiling]. It's not perfect, but I like it, that is so empowering. I also feel a lot of freedom in the air. I don't have to pretend to be someone else…. No one makes judgments.* **(Mr. D. frequent Recyclart visitor and his friend, a student of audiovisual art)**

The visibility of holes and other imperfections in the façade is not just seen as decay but it accentuates the state of incompleteness, representing an aesthetics towards soulful patina rather than cold newness. This imperfection adds strength and character to the venue, emanating a general vibe of emancipation, generosity and inclusion, thus inviting new beginnings and explorations to, and in, the place. However, the rebirth of Recyclart at a new urban environment was not always easily accepted by long-time visitors and residents in the new locality. One neighbor formed a group with a dozen other residents signing a complaint letter to protest the settlement of Recyclart in their neighborhood as they saw it as a decadent late night music party organizer. The Recyclart team spent significant time to visit neighbors, while explaining the multidisciplinary and socially engaged approach and the willingness to establish a collaborative relationship with the neighborhood to co-create events for and by the neighborhood. Trust relationships take a long time to solidify. The rebirth in a new urban void was equally questioned by long-time visitors and supporters especially at the beginning of a new start, as these two following comments showed:

> *I'm not sure if it'll work here (at the new site) … I'm not very optimistic… I think it's dead…It's far from the center, on the other side of the canal… Not many people want to come here…to this side of the canal. (Mr. E. late thirties, Belgian, working in the restaurant sector)*

> *I don't like it here… with the door… you can't see it from outside… it's more chic and Bohemian… you don't see different kinds of people… like the old place… (Ms. F, mid-twenties, French, working at media).*

From an everyday aesthetic cosmopolitan perspective, the appreciation for the rough and historic architecture in the first and second sites testifies to the preference for alternative aesthetics that is far removed from elitist art temples and the blurring between art and the built environment that comes to life with social artistic interventions and even more so in critical moments such as the eviction of the art center from its first site at Chapelle station.

It remains to be seen whether through co-productions and recurrent negotiations based on their experience in the Marol the team can replicate the Recyclart model in the new location, another urban void but with different characteristics. The story of Recyclart holds both the promise of bringing new life to urban voids but at the same time it shows the precarity of alternative art centers facing a wide range of threats ranging from market-driven forces of gentrification, from the lack of institutional support and the difficulty to include neighborhood residents in the activities of the art venue.

Conclusion

In this article we argued that everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism in engaging everyday urban life has the potential to encourage an aesthetic strategy with alternative aesthetics. In so doing these initiatives resist mainstream standards by criticizing societal oppression towards disabled, gendered, racialized, and aged bodies, and in so doing promote justice and civil discourse (Matteucci 2017; Nielsen 2003; Saito 2017, 2018). In other words, the everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism realized through socially engaged art and actions may also engender a more sustainable rethinking of how to interact with the material urban world, in particular urban voids. We zoomed in on the activities of the art center Recyclart that showcases how everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism through socially engaged art can be forged. Yet these art projects are highly appreciated and valued in more mainstream art institutions and the media at different scales because of their social authenticity and aesthetic merit. The case study not only discloses the potentials of alternative art practices and art programs but also the vulnerability of the alternative art and art centers. The vulnerability of social artistic interventions refers to the precarity of local residents engaging in the co-creation of social artistic interventions as well as gentrification of the neighborhood paradoxically generated by the activities of the art center itself. This means the art center is under threat by neoliberal market-driven forces such as the generally well documented phenomenon of gentrification in neoliberal cities or changing urban policies leading to eviction. After the eviction the art center had to reinvent itself in another site by embedding itself in the new locality and fostering a constructive dialogue with neighborhood residents in the new location. This is a tortuous and difficult undertaking. Nonetheless the case of Recyclart offers hope and inspiration for alternative forms of practicing art and giving substance and evidence to the role of everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism through social engagement and co-creation practices in re-making urban void vital and vibrant. In terms of contribution to the existing literature on cosmopolitanism, everyday aesthetics, and urban void it is twofold. We propose the new concept of everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism as a theoretical concept in urban studies applied to an art center. The study has highlighted urgent topics in discussing the relationship between socially engaged art, everyday aesthetics, cosmopolitanism, silenced urban publics, urban spaces, and development. It also contributes to the academic discussion on relational aesthetics by arguing for the possibility in balancing social effect and artistic quality. Empirically, it brings an additional case to the existing literature on everyday aesthetics and cosmopolitanism.

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