



UTS
ePRESS

Cosmopolitan
Civil Societies: An
Interdisciplinary
Journal

Vol. 14, No. 2
2022



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Citation: Pang, C. L., Hillmann, F. 2022. Urban Art and Cosmopolitanism: Re-imagining the Hybrid City through Art. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 14:2, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v14.i2.8268>

ISSN 1837-5391 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/mcs>

EDITORIAL

Urban Art and Cosmopolitanism: Re-imagining the Hybrid City through Art

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v14.i2.8268>

Article History: Received 06/07/2022; Accepted 08/07/2022; Published 27/07/2022

Abstract

In this special issue on urban art and cosmopolitanism, we explore emergent inquiry and explorations into the role of arts, artists and the reception of arts in the urban public space as cosmopolitan articulations, interventions and methodologies. Based on case studies we demonstrate how the hybrid city can be re-imagined by art interventions. However given the unprecedented pace of changes in cities across the globe more empirical investigations and theoretical reflections are needed to address the multi-faceted role of artists, arts and the reception of arts in the urban space.

Keywords

Cosmopolitanism; Everyday Aesthetics; Activism; Urban Space; Arts

In this special issue on urban art and cosmopolitanism, we explore emergent inquiry and explorations into the role of arts, artists and the reception of arts in the urban public space as cosmopolitan articulations, interventions and methodologies. The concept of cosmopolitanism is complex, manifesting in multiple forms of imaginaries, dispositions and practices ([McFarlane 2008](#)) while entailing various semantic layers including contesting meanings - the cosmopolitan project versus critical or grassroots cosmopolitanism ([Mignolo 2000](#)). Thus, it should not be conceived as a fixity but rather as a continuum ranging from de-cosmopolitanism ([Appadurai 2000](#)) to cosmopolitanism to post-cosmopolitanism ([Humphrey & Skvirskaja 2012](#)). Since the onset of globalization and neoliberalism from the 1990s until the present, art and artists have been subject to changes that resemble a roller coaster. In the euphoric decade of the 1990s until the financial crisis in the US and Europe in late 2008 s/he morphed from the image of 'a poor artist as *brotloser Künstler*' to what was advertised as 'a creative worker', embracing self-reliance, high risk and the promise of fame and recognition while downplaying the risk of financial destitution, lack of a social safety mechanism and self-exploitation. The analytical perspective on this new stratum of creative people, the neo-bohemia oscillates between seeing them as pioneers of urban regeneration ([Zukin 2009; 2010](#)), as somewhat promising protagonists of an emerging global business class ([Florida 2002](#)) or as a re-marginalized group within flexible capitalism ([Boltanski & Chiappello 2005](#)) both in the North and in the South.

The hidden problematic sides of these hipsters and creative workers have become increasingly blatant with the financial crisis in the US and Europe in 2008 which had repercussions for the countries in the South and again becoming visible with the outbreak of COVID-19, transforming artists and creative workers into the new class of the 'creative precariat' ([Arnold & Bongiovi 2013; de Peuter 2014](#)). The rude awakening from the neoliberal dream ([Florida 2002](#)) turned into a nightmare has not been lost on artists, practitioners and academics, providing fertile ground and new avenues for actions and reflections and thus pushing for more critical reflections, alternative vocabularies, theoretical underpinnings, methodologies and empirical cases. As dark clouds of COVID-19 are still floating in many parts of the world, this issue to re-envision and re-imagine urban art as cosmopolitan articulations and methodologies seems timely and promising.

We conceive the urban public space consisting of different sides and identities with conflicting interests and positionalities oscillating between the neoliberal and the vernacular, private capital and public resources, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the local and the global, thick versus superficial ties, vertical versus horizontal integration and homogenous urban contexts and mixed neighborhoods. The negotiation of public space as places of curated diversity and preservation of heritage is now in the heart of the debate on urban development ([Hillmann 2020, Frank 2020](#)). Urban public space is governed by a dynamic process whereby the 'underbelly' home to the cultural 'others' and 'outsiders' is often pushed out from its originally embedded neighborhoods to other parts of the city, and thus creating a nomadic sense of space. It seems redundant to state that here we do not envisage art as an 'individual and private affair of a white middle class—a minority that still believes it is the majority' ([Gielen & Otte 2018](#), p.277) but more as practices, interventions and performances, and thus 'embodying' the being-in-public ([Bax, Gielen & Ieven 2015](#)). These interventions are locally embedded, often located at the margins or in urban 'borderlands' while simultaneously reaching out to a wider audience through the process of hypermediatization, encompassing the interdependent relationship between actual and virtual forms of urban performances in the cities of the North and South.

Everyday aesthetics is another channel to foster alternative imaginations and thinking of diversity. The role of everyday aesthetics lies in its potential to determine the quality of life and the state of the world ([Saito 2016](#)). It has the power to contribute to the ongoing project of world-making. In so doing everyday aesthetic cosmopolitanism has the possibility to act as a node linking the material and symbolic dimension of worldliness. At the same time in order to avoid cosmopolitan naïveté we need to critically review the regimes of cosmopolitanism or seeking a balance between the potentials and limitations of the current state of 'throwntogetherness' (Thor 2015 in [Christensen & Thor 2017](#)) in contemporary global cities. Marginal

groups otherwise silenced in the mainstream art world should have the space and opportunity to resist mainstream frames by adopting a 'disobedient act of seeing' (Butler 2007, p. 952) such as refugee artists, representing the own experience of displacement and homing practices (Catalani 2019). In this regard it is important to refer to the movement of Commonism (Dockx & Gielen 2018) that opposes the growing privatization of the public space by advancing the view that the city belongs to all its inhabitants and not only to the 0.1% super-wealthy.

This special issue presents a selection of ongoing research on this relationship between artists and the making of urban spaces. By considering urban space as an important staging ground for the expression of non-mainstream arts, we leave the sphere of the already known and must open ourselves to a more experimental style of academic research.

In the contribution by Li and Pang 'Sustaining Urban Public Spaces through Everyday Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism: The Case of the Art Center Recyclart' socially-driven artistic interventions in the city are investigated by focusing on an art centre as case study. It demonstrates how artistic articulations have moved away from the elitist realm to the everyday life with an openness to objects, places, experiences, activities that constitutes daily life of people regardless of identity, occupation, social class, cultural and racial background and lifestyle. In so doing it succeeds in transforming urban voids into inclusive urban public spaces. In these socially engaged art initiatives, artists and artistic institutions do not play a leading role but act as facilitators to provide space and context for events to emerge. Through socially informed artistic interventions, practices, and performances, it succeeds in sustaining the 'publicness' of grass-roots level cosmopolitan urban space and thereby generating a sense of commonism. Yet it should be noted that gentrification ironically brought about by these very artistic activities threatens to lurk around the corner and undermine them. The art center itself became victim to eviction, whereafter it needed to re-invent itself in another urban neighborhood with different challenges.

In a similar vein, Razi & Ziminski insist in 'Physical and Digital Placemaking in a Public Art Initiative in Camden, New Jersey' on the agency of users in placemaking practices by way of a case study. They diverge from conventional studies on placemaking as part of the neoliberal agenda of global cities. They investigate the process of placemaking in Camden, New Jersey - a neighbourhood struggling with illegal dumping - by gauging the critical role of the intervention of users in constituting and animating physical and digital placemaking in an urban setting. The agency of the users is contingent on how people value their living environment, whether and how they engage in online platforms, and whether they attend events and while doing so contributing back to their community. Besides physical engagements digital representations not only created opportunities for wider outreach and longer lasting experiences of placemaking that fosters a constructive contribution to community, particularly during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The combination of physical and digital placemaking contributes to meaning making and sense of place, which ultimately engaged users towards outcomes related to shifts in perception and civic action.

Two papers in this special issue concentrate on what urban authorities on one hand judge as 'vandalism' and have to protect with fines once they get hold of the producing artist and what, on the other hand, is cherished as the evidence of high culture and superdiversity. 'Graffiti' can be both: a violation of existing laws or part of an accepted urban subculture that feeds into festivals and so on. Listening and observing what is going on in public space means to read the urban semantics. It might well be that they tell stories of missing acceptance or about the disregard of minority groups in general, that they reveal trauma and suffering of unseen groups. Put in this way, the reading of the cityscapes allows for insights on the status quo of the cosmopolitan society more generally.

The contribution by Tian Shi, 'Visualized Trauma, Sensitized Resistance: Urban Art among the French Hmong Community', directs our attention to the ambivalent role of urban art for the French Hmong community. It points to the agency and the creativity of underrepresented ethnic minority artists

by investigating how urban art visualizes trauma and enhances resilience among the members of the community. In this case the Hmong community has experienced the dual exclusion of social immobility in the French society and scarce visibility in the public domain. Here, the Laotian Hmong descendants of the former refugees are understood as expressing their frustration and anger through the making of urban art in a colorblind society. It is the second generation of this diaspora that is negotiating its ethnic identity, cultural heritage and collective memory through the production of urban art. Traumatic experiences and current social issues get visualized in public space and might serve as a starting point for a more respected next generation of such minorities.

In a different vein the article by Katya Assaf-Zakharov and Tim Schnetgöke, 'Urban Semantics through Law and Photography' concentrates on the role of graffiti and expressive visual elements of urban public spaces. They analyze the legal conflicts revolving around expressive visual elements of urban public spaces as the legal decisions unveil the battles fought over cityscapes and shed light on the different narratives that accompany urban art. The authors focus on two (non)locations: the text refers to the US-American legal system, the presented photographs depict western European cityscapes. In complete contrast to the article by Tian Shi, this study does not focus on urban art as an expression of individual feelings of exclusion or despair, but nonetheless offer us a clearly normative and activist view on urban art as expression of conflict over cityscapes. They see the consumerist ideology as being promoted constantly in the public space and point to the power that public authorities have in co-producing urban narratives and semantics. In a provocative way they tackle examples such as Christmas displays (and not events questioning religious views) or luxury exhibitions on faux leather (and not initiatives that criticize animal torture). Art, so the authors state, favors easily understandable, non-controversial and entertaining art, silencing public discourse. Assaf and Schnetgöke invite us to think about a reconceptualization of shared spaces as a 'public forum' and for this purpose the authors refer to the debate on 'the right to the city' as inspired by Henri Levebre.

The rich variety of the ways in which art and artists intersect with cosmopolitanism can be reflected only partly with the articles presented here. We hope that our special issue provides food for thought for future research on the topic. One might think of the emerging linkages of culture and arts within the discourse on heritage as put forward by UNESCO, with the idea of starting early to teach heritage as part of our culture to children in order to secure visitors to museums and heritage sites later. Projects such as Multaka, organized by 15 museums all over Europe, has begun to rediscover the topic of migration for their own work and to integrate migration-related arts and culture into their portfolio, for example by re-inventing the Antonine wall or by establishing migration theatres. At the grassroots level, many NGOs in European cities have established refugee festivals to highlight the importance of migration and diversity for open cities and inclusive societies. Arts are used to make people more sensitive to the difficult situation of refugees and to the trauma going along with exclusion – as was the case when the huge puppet Amal, representing a young female refugee, was carried for 8000 kilometers from Syria to Manchester. People felt threatened even by a refugee puppet – so this is only a tiny example on the relevance migration-related arts have for our societies. Our special issue thus cannot be more than a starting point for more research on this aspect of cosmopolitan societies and especially on their existence in public urban space. We challenge our readers to consider expanding their own research into this important area and perhaps in the future to submit work to *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies*.

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