

Hand in Hand to the Periphery we go:
*An ethnographic account of artists and community
participation in Amsterdam Nieuw-West*



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Abstract

In an attempt to counter the homogenizing effects of gentrification, the city of Amsterdam has introduced a policy that reserves spaces for artists; a group in society that struggles financially and thus to remain and socially participate in the city. These community-artist buildings or *broedplaatsen* give artists the opportunity to have a studio in Amsterdam at a lower rental price, but granting artists such a space does come with certain conditions. Through application procedures the artists are selected to participate in a project and expected to contribute to the vivacity of an area. Artists, in this sense, have become signifiers of urban regeneration, but what are the effects of these policies on artists and how do they maneuver within the limited frameworks of this urban planning scheme?

As an inhabitant and professional artist residing in a *broedplaats* in the peripheral district of Nieuw-West in Amsterdam, I chose my own position as the starting point for ethnographic research. Furthermore, conducting interviews with social (art) organizers to study the relationship between artists, art-institutions and their surrounding communities. This allows for an observation of various participatory art projects executed in the district of Nieuw-West to further understand the methods applied by artists to combat relevant social issues within their professional environment.

Therefore, the subsequent text asks the question: In a society where more responsibility is shifted from public to private initiatives, to what extent and in what way can the artist contribute to the community they are (temporarily) a part of? How is this reconcilable for artists as a symbolic signifier of gentrification? These observations are placed within larger theoretical frameworks on current gentrification developments using the concept of 'third wave gentrification'.

Through executing this research it has become evident that the temporary and precarious conditions that artists (and institutions) operate under, are the biggest obstacles to develop projects that could be of substantial and sustainable service to a community. Furthermore, the limited placement of designated artistic spaces has contributed to a hierarchy where an institution

gets to determine which artists may participate and under what terms. The artist is caught in a vicious circle; they have become an expert at adapting and adjusting their practice to fulfill external requirements, whilst at the same time having to constantly prove their authenticity.

Foreword

As urban areas continue to grow in this neo-liberal day and age one can recognize patterns that come with these transitions, changes that are of great significance to a large number of contemporary urban citizens. Yet each specific situation brings with it new challenges and as we face the consequences of regeneration in urban spaces, relating the different cases to each other can be very beneficial when understanding and interacting with these changes.

As an artist coming to live in a community-artist-building in a neighborhood in the far west of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, I was confronted with various complications; complications about my position in relation to the community, my role as an artist, and the feeling of being a pawn within the uncontrollable system of gentrification. When choosing my surroundings as an object of study and conducting ethnographic research from the building in which I reside as a starting point, it was with the intention to familiarize myself with the neighborhood and to step out of a feeling of isolation and disconnect from my environment. I wanted to uncover if there was a way to build or become a part of a genuine community by applying my professional training as an artist and through analyzing the outcomes of creative exchanges. This thesis is an extension of fieldwork I had conducted in the neighborhood previously, but with a greater focus on the potential of artistic collaboration within the community.

Glossary:

Broedplaats: (plural form in Dutch is ‘broedplaatsen’) literally translates into a breeding ground or incubator. Brought into existence through the city of Amsterdam’s policy in the year 2000, a broedplaats is a collectively shared building for artists and entrepreneurs in the cultural and creative sector

Nieuw-West: a relatively green district in the far west of Amsterdam also referred to as the Western Garden-cities (NL: Westelijke tuinsteden)

Urban Resort: The largest broedplaats organization of Amsterdam, managing seventeen buildings throughout the city

CAWA: A municipal organization that assesses the transformation of a building to a broedplaats and also assesses the professionalism of an artist. In order to apply for a CAWA subsidized studio one needs to pass the CAWA test and become registered officially as a professional artist

Free-spaces (NL: vrijplaatsen): designated spaces reserved for creative experimentation often used interchangeably with the term broedplaats while some argue that a free-space needs to be established autonomously and not through municipal ties

Squatting: The action of occupying an abandoned building or area of land. This was very popular in Amsterdam from the 1960s – 1980s and became illegal in 2010. To this day a few squats remain in the city, but have been closing down at a quick pace in the last few years.

Anti-Squat & temporary rent (NL: antikraak en tijdelijk beheer): Rental systems widely implemented in Amsterdam to stop the squatting culture. Although these systems offer people affordable housing they are criticized because in exchange for low rent, tenants have very little rights and a very short notice of eviction. Another point of scrutiny is that organizations often allocate large spaces to few people while there is a housing shortage in the city.

Gentrification: the process of repairing and rebuilding homes and businesses in a deteriorating area (such as an urban neighborhood) accompanied by an influx of middle-class or affluent people and often resulting in the displacement of earlier, usually poorer residents¹

¹ Definition as found in the Merriam Webster dictionary

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Introduction

Gentrification, a contemporary issue within urban spaces, referring to the process of relocation of capital, class and culture. It is a process that has the effect of swallowing itself whole, like a snake biting into its tail; the affluence turns into sterility; what once contributed to the eccentricity of a neighborhood becomes a norm that only the elite can afford. The area starts to become homogenous, and homogenous is not a word citizens like to use when defining their city.

Amsterdam is a city with a vibrant and diverse history, of which in the last decades, squatting culture played a major role. However, the abolition of legalized squatting in 2010, led to the disappearance of numerous ‘free-spaces’. This in combination with the rising rent prices is making the city inaccessible to low-income earners, concurrently leading to a shrinking counter-culture. Spaces for experimentation are rapidly disappearing in the city of Amsterdam and this is widely noticed by its citizens². In an attempt to salvage what many understand as one of its main qualities, many lectures, discussions, and demonstrations about these topics have recently been brought into place.

In order to achieve accessibility for various financial groups and maintain diversity within the population of the city, policy has been introduced in which attention is directed towards establishing student housing with

² See various Dutch newspaper articles covering the disappearance of Amsterdam’s free-spaces leading to the cities’ diminishing cultural diversity:

1. Grooten, Lene, and Frans Tartwijk. “Zonder vrijplaatsen verliest Amsterdam haar kunstenaars.” *Het Parool* (Amsterdam), June 22, 2015.
<https://www.parool.nl/columns-opinie/zonder-vrijplaatsen-verliest-amsterdam-haar-kunstenaars~b9f62d4b/>
2. Smit, Maxime. “Kunstenaars waarschuwen voor het verdwijnen van ateliers.” *Het Parool* (Amsterdam), October 26, 2016.
<https://www.parool.nl/nieuws/kunstenaars-waarschuwen-voor-verdwijnen-van-ateliers~b59bd916/>
3. Hanne, Obbink. “Een van de laatste vrijplaatsen van Amsterdam dreigt te verdwijnen.” *Trouw* (Amsterdam), February 16, 2017.
<https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/een-van-de-laatste-vrijplaatsen-van-amsterdam-dreigt-te-verdwijnen~b03a648a/>

circulating inhabitants, temporary rental contracts³ are constructed more frequently with very low rates in comparison to the cities' median, and measures have been taken to keep spaces attainable for artists. Although appearing progressive on paper, these policies are widely criticized as they play an important part in the current processes of gentrification and arguably contribute to the cities' diminishing eccentricity.

In the year 2000, the first policy for developing and maintaining community-artist buildings (in Dutch: *broedplaats*) was constructed. Seventeen years later, as a freshly graduated art student with an interest in participatory art, I found myself moving into a so-called 'broedplaats' in the far west of Amsterdam. Upon entering this new neighborhood, however, it was soon clear that we as artists were playing a major role in the economic and cultural transition of the area. Not only was our appearance noticeably different from that of the original inhabitants, but also our presence, the programs, and events we were organizing in the building were attracting people from the city center and not our new neighbors. Concurrently, the surrounding area of our building was rapidly changing as buildings were being constructed to accommodate more middle and higher-income residential housing.

At the same time, another trend was taking place; the dismantling of the welfare state was leading to a new focus on societal participation and this trend could be recognized in the field of arts as well. From the Dutch King stating that the Netherlands is changing from a welfare state into a 'participatory society'⁴, to Claire Bishop, who in her book *Participation* (2006) analyzes the developments of the social dimension of participation within the arts – it is clear that *participation* has become a loaded word, burdened by the question; with *whom* does this social responsibility lie?

³ The temporary-rent contract stems from 'anti-squat' contracts, preventing buildings from remaining vacant and subsequently, from being squatted.

⁴ The King of the Netherlands, Willem-Alexander, introduced the phrase 'participatiesamenleving' (EN: participation society) in 2013: "Het is onmiskenbaar dat mensen in onze huidige netwerk- en informatiesamenleving mondiger en zelfstandiger zijn dan vroeger. Gecombineerd met de noodzaak om het tekort van de overheid terug te dringen, leidt dit ertoe dat de klassieke verzorgingsstaat langzaam maar zeker verandert in een participatiesamenleving. Van iedereen die dat kan, wordt gevraagd verantwoordelijkheid te nemen voor zijn of haar eigen leven en omgeving."

As a response to growing individualism in western culture, the diminishing welfare state forcing society to take care of ourselves more, isolation distinctive of the digital age, and growing social bubbles distancing us from people with differing political views, attention has been directed to bringing about connectivity. As Jacques Rancière states, “Art no longer wants to respond to the excess of commodities and signs but to a lack of connections.”⁵

In replacement of self-ruling and autonomous free-spaces came the municipally linked *broedplaats*, often granted space in the outskirts of the city, where there was still space for construction and where social issues connected to poverty were more prevalent. Through application procedures, artists were invited to participate in communities in areas of transition. For the municipality this was a beneficial situation⁶; the artists could help contribute to the vitality of an area, support the surrounding community through community-oriented projects and once the area developed, the spaces of the artists could be renovated and made available again for new residents, in the case of Nieuw-West, this meant more middle and higher income residents.

Urban-schemes and city-planning, determining what kind of buildings come where and subsequently which economic-class gets to inhabit which area is of course not new. What does change throughout history are the traits and symbols adhering to these different classes and in this neo-liberal day and age we are witnessing cultural symbols linked to autonomy and cultural freedom, paradoxically being appropriated, commoditized and connected to affluent classes of society. Many theorists have connected gentrification to the migration of artists to certain areas of a city and the writing of authors such as

⁵ Bishop, Claire. “Introduction.” In *Participation*, 14. Cambridge: Mit Press, 2006.

⁶ “Eerst komen er kunstenaars en dergelijke. Hun komst trekt horeca en andere voorzieningen. En dat maakt een buurt aantrekkelijk voor een nieuw soort bewoner. Zo kan een hele buurt een boost krijgen.” – Ronald Mauer, D66 bestuurder.

From: Obbink, Hanne. “Broedplaatsen voor kunstenaars laten Amsterdam bruisen.” *Trouw* (Amsterdam), June 11, 2017.

<https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/broedplaatsen-voor-kunstenaars-laten-amsterdam-bruisen~bed7b427/>

Richard Florida has encouraged city-planners to reserve space for the “hip, funky & cool” as it not only diversifies an area, but according to the author, also brings about economic prosperity to an area.

City or municipal bodies taking the creative-class⁷ into account in urban-planning schemes has been dubbed “third-wave gentrification” and this theory will be more thoroughly explained within the first chapter. Third-wave gentrification has led to the placement of *broedplaatsen* such as Broedplaats Lely, and thus the introduction of artists within peripheral neighborhoods such as Nieuw-West.

When applying current theory on gentrification and observing the recent turn to societal participation, whilst analyzing Broedplaats Lely as a study case:

- What is the role of the artist within the community they (temporarily) become a part of?
 - What effects do the expectations, imposed upon the artist through policy, have on this role?
 - What are the effects of current policy on ‘community’?
- In what ways or how can the artist contribute or make a difference in society through their profession – especially when confronted with the paradox of wanting to contribute to a community, but simultaneously being a signifier of that community’s disappearance?

Having a personal interest in participatory art and sensing the isolation of the *broedplaats* in which I reside from the neighborhood, I wanted to explore the position of the artist within the social and political framework of a *broedplaats* and how and in what ways the artist could apply their art within the community.

⁷ Creative-class as used by Richard Florida in *The Rise of the Creative Class*. In the first chapter this term will be analyzed more elaborately.

This thesis will present the developments of a journey that is both personal and prevalent in major cities across the world. It is an ethnographic account, analyzing current policy concerning a transitioning city. Because this research is so personal, for it studies the neighborhood in which I live, the community-artist building in which I reside and is inspected through the lens of my profession as an artist; the method of ethnography was a clear and evident choice for research. It allowed me to analyze my surroundings and to take distance from the circumstances specific to my life and to recognize the larger systems occurring.

Throughout the thesis, theory and personal observation are woven together in order to gain a deeper understanding of the political and social contexts of Broedplaats Lely. This research has been written from the perspective of the artist and looks through the lens of, as a friend and fellow tenant put it, the “anomaly”⁸ that is Broedplaats Lely - a building with a history of its own, temporarily occupied by a group of artists symbolizing the progressing gentrification.

Broedplaats Lely remains isolated from the surrounding community. Alienation occurs through cultural differences as the *broedplaats* residents stand out through their artistic eccentricity or due to structural differences, as the residents in this community building are highly educated and many are coming from upper and middle-class income families, in contrast to the original inhabitants of the neighborhood. And lastly, this isolation is due to the unending construction surrounding the building, making the appearance of the building not only unwelcoming, but serving as a constant reminder to the neighboring community that according to policymakers, this area is in need of massive amounts of capital injection before it can be deemed “livable”.

⁸ As said by Tatjana Macić: <https://artkosmika.com/>

Building upon current theory on gentrification and accepting that we have entered the third wave of this urban regeneration, I will explore the paradoxes of this phenomenon and the ways the artists and the surrounding community maneuver in between them.

In the first chapter, I will start by positioning Broedplaats Lely within recent theory on gentrification. To get a better understanding from my perspective as a tenant of the building and a resident of the neighborhood I will continue to introduce the ethnographic setting. Firstly, by introducing the neighborhood of Nieuw-West in Amsterdam, the area on which this thesis is focused. Then, the community artist building in which I live and work: Broedplaats Lely. I will continue to introduce my professional position within the organization Urban Resort, the organization that manages Broedplaats Lely, which has given me more insight into the complexities behind the ways cultural organizations maneuver within the structures of policy.

The second chapter delves into contemporary understandings of participation and why society has become so eager to (re)build communities. I will examine the concept of “community” following the analysis of Anthony P. Cohen, in *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. Based on my ethnographic findings, I will then discuss the expectations of professional artists in relation to the community they are a part of, and the ways control is imposed through policy to realize these expectations and the effect this is having on artists and communities.

The final chapter is an analysis of contemporary participatory art projects carried out in Nieuw-West. Building upon François Matarasso’s definition of participatory art and analyzing participatory art projects through Nicolas Bourriaud’s theory on relational art, this analysis follows the process of numerous projects within Broedplaats Lely organized by the arts institute De Appel and other institutions working in Nieuw-West. Through interviews conducted with the artistic producers it serves as an amplifier of the voice of the artist and is an observation of what is needed when attempting to achieve community participation.

Using my experience as a resident and artist in the neighborhood as ground for observing gentrification in its various dimensions as well as the strategies employed by artists to combat its effects on community, I intend to present an ethnographic portrait of the developments specific to the neighborhood of Nieuw-west, as well as a set of recommendations that can further be transferred when organizing community-oriented projects.

An Eccentric Stranger in the Village

“The aesthetic disposition frequently rejected commercialized middle-class products, practices, places, while upholding the off-centre, the ordinary and obsolete, even the plebeian. The redemptive eye of the artist could turn junk into art. The calculating eye of others would turn art into commodity, a practice as true of the inner-city property market as of the art work.”⁹

The personal journey I am writing about started in January 2017, when I moved into a building in the west of Amsterdam called Broedplaats Lely. The old high-school building had been turned into community homes and studios, housing over fifty artists. Each of us received a classroom to live and work in and on the ground and the first floor there are studios inhabited by artists and a variety of organizations such as the electronic music studio, Steim, and the contemporary arts institute, De Appel.¹⁰

However eager to receive a space within a community of artists, many of us quickly felt out of place in the area and questioned what our role could be towards the surrounding community that we had suddenly become a part of. We were grateful to be guaranteed a space within Amsterdam, but simultaneously aware that our arrival in the neighborhood symbolized approaching gentrification, leaving us uncertain about how to participate in our surroundings.

⁹ Ley, David. “Artists, Aestheticisation and the Field of Gentrification.” *Urban Studies* 40, no. 12 (2003), 2527-2544.

¹⁰ Both of these organizations were forced to leave their locations in the center due to funding cuts.

1.1 The political economy of artists and hipsters

Within present-day's discourse on gentrification in major cities, Richard Florida's book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*¹¹, has received a fair deal of criticism. Although by now the author has stepped back from many of the implications he made within his book and has published new work in an attempt to form a more nuanced account, Florida's 'creative class' undeniably had a large impact on the way society perceives 'hipsters' and the effect they have on their surroundings.

Post-Florida, the 'creative-class' has seemed to become *the* target group when looking for reasons a neighborhood has found itself in the process of gentrification. This is not without reason, for government officials and policymakers around the world embraced Florida's analysis as a guidebook for economic growth while simultaneously valorizing contemporary cosmopolitan thinking: "According to this increasingly pervasive urban-development script, the dawn of a 'new kind of capitalism based on human creativity' calls for funky forms of supply-side intervention, since cities now find themselves in a high-stakes 'war for talent', one that can only be won by developing the kind of 'people climates' valued by creatives - urban environments that are open, diverse, dynamic and cool."¹²

In order for cities to compete on a global scale, innovation and creativity are necessary factors for standing out. To remain attractive for people who will contribute to this innovation, cities need to provide the right infrastructure for creatives. And policy-makers applied Florida's urban-development script, eagerly accepting that in a neighborhood where there is growing creativity, wealth will surely follow.

¹¹ Florida, Richard. *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, 2004.

¹² This quote by Florida is taken from Jamie Peck's paper, *Struggling with the Creative Class*

1.1.1 Defining the 'creative-class'

A foreboding hipster walks down the street, esthetically clashing with the rest of the area's discernable dwellers; in a few years' time this species will have attracted more of its kind, and, having no natural predators, it will flourish and take-over the territory, until they too become the target of the capitalist-market system and this ever-present and looming predator swallows the district and its hipsters whole. Leaving the area's streets unoccupied, with only a few international investors picking at the remaining skeletons of the buildings, once home to families, now turned into privatized carcasses.

Yet let us take a step back from this dystopian nightmare and observe this phenomenon. There is something very superficial to attributing gentrification to 'creatives' and it is of great importance to achieve some clarity when defining whom we speak of when mentioning the 'creative-class'. Ann Markusen rightfully appeals to a distinction between the different professions all encapsulated under Florida's umbrella term 'creative class.' She writes, "in the creative class, occupations that exhibit distinctive spatial and political proclivities are bunched together, purely on the basis of educational attainment, and with little demonstrable relationship to creativity," and continues to say that, "the formation, location, urban impact and politics of the occupation of artists are much more complex and distinctive than has been suggested previously."¹³

Apparently artists bear the symbols that are deemed desirable by the urban elite, however, these are cultural symbols that are being appropriated by more affluent groups in society. Which is why it is of importance to distinguish, as Markusen does, one group from another. The word 'hipster', like Florida's term 'creative-class', is a one-dimensional description of an urban social group. An image appears in one's mind when the word 'hipster' is used, but it is because of its superficiality that no one can identify with the term.

Within our neo-liberal society, the parameters through which most artists maneuver are more constricting than many of the other people

¹³ Markusen, A., "Urban development and the politics of a creative class: evidence from a study of artists." *Environment and planning A* 38, no. 10 (2006): 1921-1940.

categorized as ‘hipsters’. Due to their educational background and their cultural capital, artists are regarded as prevalent members of the dominant (middle) class in society, but “the life of the artist is an invitation to voluntary poverty and here is the first manifestation of a calculus that is incomprehensible to economism.”¹⁴ David Ley continues to back this statement of poverty amongst North American artists with numbers and these statistics are not an exception when looking at the income of the contemporary professional artist in the Netherlands. “The gross income of graduates of the visual arts is on average €880 per month.”¹⁵ (Griffioen)

It is clear that the average artist struggles to afford to live in modern day cities and this struggle has been recognized by the city of Amsterdam, thus a policy for *broedplaatsen* was brought into place. The municipality grants permission, allowing a certain building to be turned into a *broedplaats* for a certain period of time and the artists granted space in the building can remain in the tightening city a little while longer. Yet the high density of *broedplaatsen* in peripheral areas is no coincidence. It is apparent that policy has recognized the value of artists residing in empty buildings in the developing and changing areas of the city.

1.2.2 Third wave gentrification

Different theorists have labeled the current urban regeneration as ‘third wave’ gentrification. According to the authors Coaffee and Stuart in their text “Art, Gentrification and Regeneration – from Artist as Pioneer to Public Arts” (2005), in the so-called ‘first wave,’ the artists created their own suitable environment for the creation of art, and in the ‘second wave,’ this art and the artists surroundings became private commodities, now, in the ‘third wave’ there is a “more explicit public-policy engagement and link to regeneration” taking place with an “emphasis on the public consumption of art, through public art and artistic events and particularly through the creation of landmark

¹⁴ Ley, David. “Artists, Aestheticisation and the Field of Gentrification.” *Urban Studies* 40, no. 12 (2003) page 2533

¹⁵ Griffioen, Roel. “De precaire/creatieve stad.” In *De Frontlinie: Bestaansonzekerheid en gentrificatie in de Creatieve Stad*, 11-32. Amsterdam 2016.

physical infrastructure for the arts.”¹⁶ And within this implemented system, creative professionals serve as exemplary models of the ideal neoliberal laborer – they are “agile, flexible, and can think of creative solutions with minimal measures”¹⁷.

It is too easy to say that the artist is responsible for the processes of gentrification. The artists do not displace the original inhabitants; policy does. An inclusive city that embraces creativity seems like the epitome of a modern and civilized society. Unfortunately, in practice, it is contributing to hierarchical thinking, where the so-called creative-class is elevated as the desirable group within society and where symbols linked to creativity are linked to wealth and prosperity. Thus, municipalities favoring “funky forms of supply-side intervention”¹⁸ without establishing strategies to keep the city accessible for people of all incomes, brings with it a hierarchy where ‘funky’ pertains to the elite and where ‘normal’ becomes lower class.

Ironically, this power dynamic is a paradox, as a large part of this socially elevated creative-class cannot even participate with the financially elite part of the same class due to economic struggles. Eventually, a part of this class is forced to leave as the city offers less and less leeway for economic diversity. Developing climates in urban environments that are open, diverse and cool without applying policies to counter the ramifications of gentrification eventually leads to an environment that is the opposite of open, diverse, dynamic and cool.

¹⁶ Cameron, Stuart, and Jon Coaffee. “Art, Gentrification and Regeneration – from Artist as Pioneer to Public Arts.” *International Journal of Housing Policy* 5, no. 1 (2005): 39-5

¹⁷ From *De Frontlinie*, by Roel Griffioen p. 13

¹⁸ Florida, Richard. *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, 2004.

1.2 An introduction to the ethnographic setting

Bearing in mind that artists may socially pertain to the middle-class, but economically (usually) do not and building upon the theory of third wave gentrification, it is time to turn our attention to the ethnographic setting. When observing Broedplaats Lely as a case study, it is of importance that we understand the urban context of the building and how it relates to the neighborhood of Nieuw-West. Additionally, when observing the community within Broedplaats Lely it is crucial to understand how the community of artists relates to the building in which they reside and how this community was established.

1.2.1 Nieuw-West

Amsterdam is well known for its historical architecture and canals, dating from the 1600-1800s. These monumental buildings are located in the inner area of the city and the more one travels to the edge of the city the more modern the architecture becomes. The Amsterdam freeway ring has been a signifier of

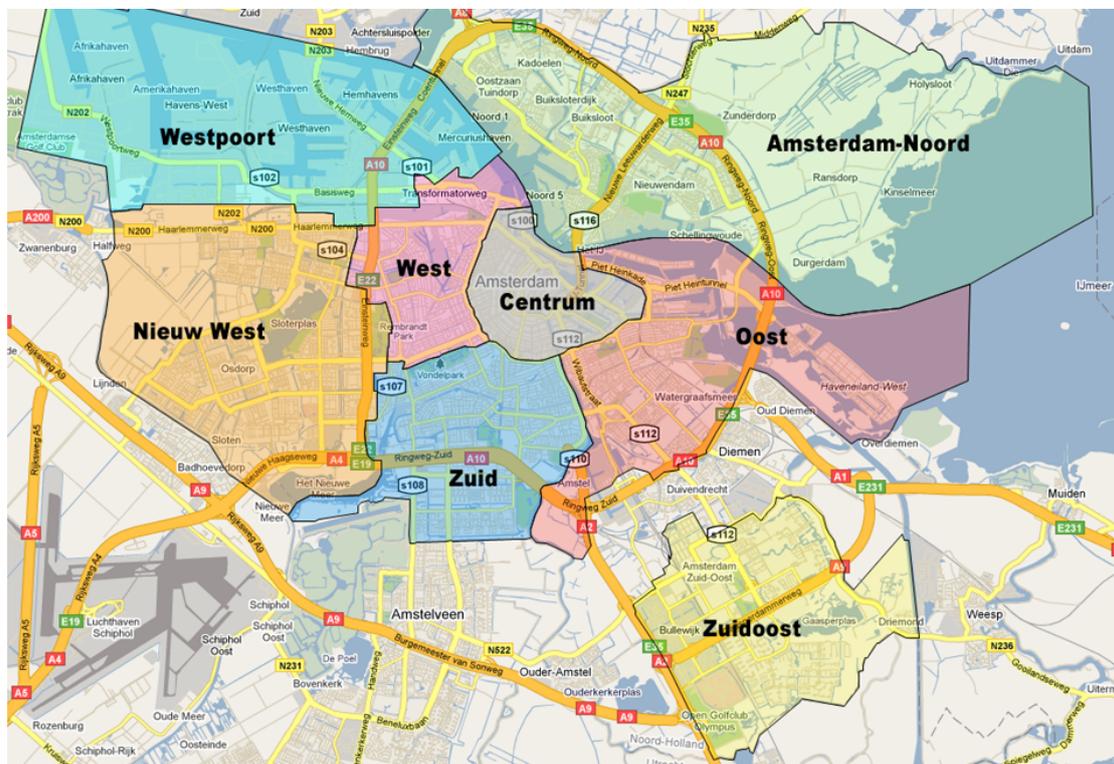


Figure 1: An image of Amsterdam divided into its districts, including the freeway ring (yellow)

economic and social differences of the previous decades. One refers to living “within or outside of the ring”¹⁹.

Nieuw-West is a district located in the far west of Amsterdam, outside of the freeway ring. Most of the buildings were erected around the 1950s and 60s. Many of these buildings are in dire need of renovation and currently, a significant part is being torn down and replaced by more modern and luxurious housing.

This peripheral district is Amsterdam’s largest and greenest area. Because most of its oldest architecture dates from the 1950s the district has a more modern and spacious feel to it than many of the cities’ more historic central-lying districts. The area is also referred to as the Western garden cities (in Dutch: Westelijke tuinsteden). Although the inhabitants cherish the amount of green space in the district, the area requires much tending and care.

To list a few statistics, the percentage of socially rented homes is relatively high and in blocks where the houses will be renovated there is a lot of temporary housing. The population in more than half of the district has a non-western migration background of which the largest percentage of migrants are of Moroccan and Turkish descent; this percentage is much higher than in most other districts of Amsterdam. There are relatively few cultural platforms in comparison to the number of inhabitants; for example, even though there are fifty-five official cinemas in the city of Amsterdam, not one of them is located in the district of Nieuw-West. In comparison to the other districts of Amsterdam there is a higher percentage of youth unemployment and chronic and mental health issues, and issues such as social isolation. Furthermore, inhabitants complain about the lack of cleanliness of the neighborhood.

In a study recently conducted by the University of Amsterdam²⁰ on the neighborhood Overtoomse Veld²¹ in the district of Nieuw-West, the researchers

¹⁹ In Dutch: binnen of buiten de ring

²⁰ Kremer, Monique, Astrid Parys, and Loes Verplanke. *Alledaagse attentheid in een superdiverse wijk*, 2019. Translation of title: *Everyday attentiveness in a super diverse neighborhood*

²¹ The community artist building in which I reside is located on the junction of the neighborhoods Overtoomse Veld and Sloterveer, within the district of Nieuw-West.

point out that super-diversity²² and economic deprivation, both present in the district, are not beneficial factors when examining the social cohesion of an area. Language barriers and cultural differences are factors that can lead to social isolation. Moreover, social and especially temporary rent structures do not contribute to a sense of ownership of space nor the will to care for it. And in a neighborhood where the chronic health issues are of a relatively higher percentage, accordingly so, the need for social welfare is as well.

Since it is a district with a lot of room for improvement, the municipality has focused its attention on Nieuw-West and has developed many plans for the cultural and economic growth of the area.²³ The introduction of the *broedplaats* to the neighborhood is a result of this.

1.2.2 Broedplaats Lely

A *broedplaats* (plural form is *broedplaatsen*) literally translates into a breeding ground or incubator and is a Dutch term defining a collective building of, often, affordable workplaces, studios, and in some cases living spaces specifically for artists and entrepreneurs in the cultural and creative sector.

It is a term that is slowly gaining popularity as *broedplaatsen* start to become more and more prevalent within Dutch urban spheres. I had never heard of the term until I ran into an online advertisement of the *broedplaats* in which I now live. At the time this advertisement had come to me as a blessing. I was living in a wonderful house in the center of Amsterdam, but with a temporary contract²⁴ and after having graduated art-school a year before, I was desperately looking for a studio to get back into the art-making and out of the post-graduation blues. In order to sign up as a candidate for a room I had to

²² Currently in Amsterdam there are just as many residents having a migrant-background as there are with a Dutch background. The study refers to the neighborhood of Overtoomse Veld as being 'super-diverse' because of the exceptionally diverse demographics of the neighborhood when considering cultural background, age, gender, and economic class.

²³ To see statistics of Nieuw-West and of Amsterdam visit:

<https://www.ois.amsterdam.nl/downloads/pdf/2018%20jaarboek%20amsterdam%20in%20cijfers.pdf> & <http://slidegur.com/doc/6811471/gebiedsanalyse-2016-slotervaart-stadsdeel-nieuw-west>

²⁴ This temporary contract was similar to the anti-squat contract and had a very short notice of eviction.

register and apply as a professional artist through CAWA, a municipal organization specialized in facilitating affordable studios for artists.

Furthermore, we had to send in a portfolio, a motivational letter to Urban Resort, the organization maintaining the building, and write a plan illustrating how we would contribute to artistic future programs within the community. The old school building came equipped with a large auditorium and it was Urban Resort's objective to have the selected residing artists fill up this large space with their own artistic programs. The building was to serve as a new cultural venue in Amsterdam, providing its citizens with an experimental artistic program as alternative spaces for such programs were rapidly declining throughout the rest of the city.

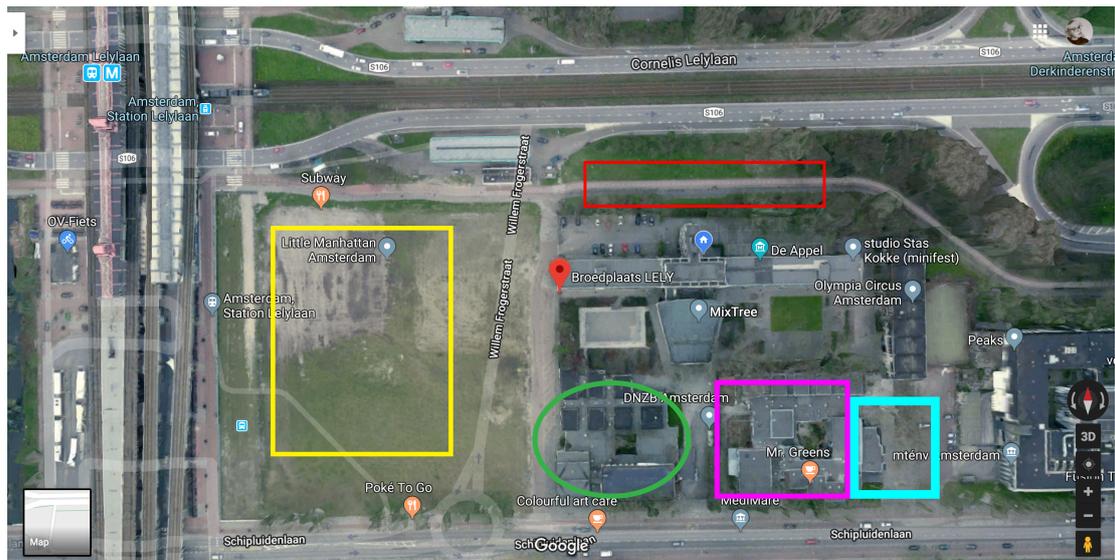
After submitting my application I was first rejected and put on a waiting list, but then I finally received the relieving news that I had been selected as one of the artists in Broedplaats Lely; another three years of residency guaranteed in the ever-tightening city of Amsterdam. Full of hope, optimism and fresh plans for our new artistic community, over fifty artists moved into this old school, scraping the gum off the floor and painting over the teenagers' tags on the walls, turning the spacious classrooms into our studios.

The school was constructed at the end of the 1960s and was built in an area surrounded by green fields, but the moment we moved into this old school it was an island placed in the middle of a construction site²⁵. Positioned next to a train station these plots of land, which still had space for building, were of great interest to investors in the ever-expanding city of Amsterdam. This once green area was to become a densely populated and modernized residential district.

To give you an indication of how Broedplaats Lely is becoming completely surrounded by new buildings I took an image from Google Maps, on which none of the completed construction is visible yet and drew in the

²⁵ Broedplaats Lely was going to be demolished but ended up receiving a monumental status.

new buildings and planned structures.



- YELLOW FIGURE:** Little Manhattan, housing over 700 students was completed in 2017
- GREEN FIGURE:** These smaller buildings were demolished last year and this is currently a recreational field. Construction will start this year: 2019
- PINK FIGURE:** These buildings have been demolished and the new one was completed in 2018
- BLUE FIGURE:** Completed in 2019
- RED FIGURE:** Construction for a new building here starts in 2020

Living in the midst of a construction site took its toll on us more than we expected. Besides having to deal with the route to our front door constantly changing, making our building very inaccessible (for ourselves, guests, mail delivery, etc.) the noise disturbance starting every weekday at an early hour in the morning was delivering a great deal of stress onto everyone.

As most of us use our studios as working spaces, we were exposed to this noise for eight hours a day. Our patience was running low and the frustration high. Hearing your neighbors practice their instrument in the evening or people hanging out and laughing outdoors after an exhibition became too much to handle for many. What we once believed to be a fair price of rent for the spaces we occupied, we started to regard as overpriced. We were all struggling to collect a month's rent for a house enclosed by disorder. By the time our contracts would end the construction would have subdued. Every month we received an invoice from the organization we rented the rooms from with the, by now, slightly sardonic name, 'Urban Resort'.

1.2.3 An introduction to Urban Resort

Shortly after I started living in Broedplaats Lely I received a job within the building to manage the programs that took place in the auditorium and to connect the artists from within the building to these programs, but to also find external parties interested in accessing the space. This job position gave me two perspectives towards the building; as a tenant and a residing artist, but it also gave me the opportunity to get to know Urban Resort, the organization that maintains the building, from the inside out. I quickly learned about the complexities that the organization faces when making new arrangements with the municipality and about the ideals that give fuel to the employees and that are at the core of their foundation.

Formed by a group of people with origins in the Amsterdam squatting scene, Urban Resort serves as the link between municipal institutions and the creative field, relieving artists of the bureaucracy that comes with the formation of a *broedplaats*.²⁶ As a group with a strong affiliation for preserving free spaces (in Dutch: *vrijplaatsen*), designated spaces reserved for creative experimentation, they have an understanding of what an artist needs to be able to experiment and have put their network within the municipality to use to realize new *broedplaatsen* for artists.

They have grown to be the largest *broedplaats* organization of Amsterdam, currently managing seventeen buildings throughout the city. Their input has been of great importance to many artists in the city and as Roel Griffioen writes in his book, “Without the existence of housing projects or *broedplaatsen*, precarious and freelance based employees in the cultural field would never be able to afford to live or have a studio in Amsterdam.”

But the author continues the paragraph on a more critical note, stating, “That does not alter the fact that these projects exist thanks to the same juridical loopholes as regular anti-squat and temporary rental procedures and demonstrate in the same way a shift from living as a right to living as a privilege. In my opinion, artist housing companies who work with

²⁶ To read more about how the organization Urban Resort started (only in Dutch) see: <https://urbanresort.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Geschiedenis-van-Urban-Resort.pdf>

corporations, governments, and developers do not realize enough that new patronage is being created: living patronage that determines who can – may – live in the city.”²⁷

Urban Resort’s intentions are in favor of low earning artists and they aim to keep Amsterdam a livable city for all citizens. In order to keep a city lively it needs economic, social, and cultural diversity and who better to ignite this diversity than artists? Yet how is it then possible that through igniting this creativity that the organization is contributing to the cities’ homogeneity?

Due to the limited spaces made available for artists, an organization such as Urban Resort is forced to create an application procedure, after all the organization wants to provide spaces to people who will contribute to the creative expression of a city. Yet, as Griffioen points out, through this selection of creative professionals – one group will always be favored over another. Housing organizations providing spaces for artists, working together with corporations and governments not only inadvertently decide who has to leave and who gets to stay, but also determine the creative climate of the city.

These are issues that do not pass unnoticed within the organization. Urban Resort appeals to a sustainable rental climate and tries to only accept buildings with a minimum five-year rental period.²⁸ Moreover, the economic pull of gentrification makes it repeatedly harder for an organization like Urban Resort to exist at all, as the number of buildings in Amsterdam suddenly ending up in between occupation continues to diminish and the property rates continue to rise, making it harder for *broedplaats*-organizations to obtain property at a low rate and subsequently to offer studios to artists at affordable prices.

²⁷ Griffioen, Roel. “De precaire / creatieve stad.” In *De Frontlinie: Bestaansonzekerheid en gentrificatie in de Creatieve Stad*, 30. Amsterdam 2016. The original quote is in Dutch, translated in this text by myself.

My colleagues and I were gifted this book by the previous director of Urban Resort, Jaap Draaisma.

²⁸ Broedplaats Lely was an exception; because they could house fifty artists Urban Resort felt it was worth the three-year rental period.

1.3 Future Building Blocks

To conclude, professional artists in search of affordable spaces move to the areas where the real-estate prices are still low, to the underserved areas of Amsterdam clad in symbols of scarcity. In Amsterdam, where the freeway-ring divides the city symbolically (and economically), with Bikram-yoga studios, concept-coffee shops, and *bakfietsen*²⁹ on the inside of the ring and on the outside, Halal Fried Chicken³⁰, Turkish tea shops and satellite dishes geometrically arranged on the façades of apartment blocks so its residents can receive favorite tv-channels from a home that is far away.

The aesthetics of artists have been capitalized upon; people want the vivacity, the bohemian, but without the precarious lifestyle. The capitalization on the aesthetics that are attached to precarious lifestyles is but another of capitalism's ironic gestures. Material dragged in from the street that is creatively repurposed as furniture becomes fashionable and suddenly one can find wooden pallets in high-end boutiques classified as DIY (Do it yourself) style.

Sadly, a common side effect of capitalism is the adoption of symbols that represent autonomous lifestyles, symbols that are linked to personal or cultural freedom, which become commodities and consumed without any notion of the objects' history.

Many a time have I been pained by the awkward position I found myself in as an artist and as a resident of this city. I recall walking down a market in the west of Amsterdam after a Pilates class, pink yoga mat tucked beneath my arm, looking to purchase vegetables for a lower price than in the supermarkets and hearing the phrase, "I hate how this neighborhood is changing and being taken over by *these* people," when looking up at the two young men, leaning on their scooters, I was surprised to see that their

²⁹ A cargo bike that can be commonly spotted in Amsterdam, most typically ridden by a mother transporting multiple children.

³⁰ HFC or the Halal Fried Chicken chain (open since 2014), as its name gives away, is a halal take on the American chain, Kentucky Fried Chicken.

statement was directed towards me and I suddenly felt a jolt of shame run through me, as if I were an embodiment of gentrification.

Or when I found myself at a loss for words in Broedplaats Lely, showing the main venue of the building to a member of the previous local council, when he proudly spoke to me as an employee of Urban Resort and said “there would be many more *broedplaatsen* coming my way as there are many neighborhoods in Amsterdam in need of refurbishing,” and realized that there was no shame on his side for blatantly using artists as a tool of gentrification.³¹

Yet I have reached a point where I refuse to feel guilty, for the feeling of guilt has left me dormant. To quote Audre Lorde: “Guilt and defensiveness are bricks in a wall against which we will all perish, for they serve none of our futures.”³²

Still, when I critique the amount of responsibility credited to the artist and their effect on the gentrification of an area I do not claim that there is no responsibility. Municipalities of various cities have accepted Florida’s words as an incentive to facilitate artists in neighborhoods or areas of the city in need of rejuvenation. The artists have been instrumentalized and pushed forward as ‘pioneers’³³ of areas where people from the cultural field had not yet dared to set foot.

But how far can the artist bend until she breaks? Should she not do more than passively wait and allow others to discover how agile she truly is? Should these professionals consciously be used as tools of urban development especially when this urban development leads to the displacement of a large number of lower-income residents from the area of which the artists are a part of. Is the agile, flexible, creative artist not being slightly opportunistic when

³¹ *I am a tool of Gentrification* is the title of an experimental documentary film series by the Amsterdam based artist Lyubov Matyunina.

³² Lorde, Audre. “The Uses of Anger.” In *Womens Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 25, 278-285. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1997.

³³ This ‘pioneering’, which artists have done, has happened autonomously in cities throughout history and the word pioneer has been largely critiqued, (ie. see: Rosler, M. “Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism, Part I & Part II”. E-Flux. Journal #21 and Journal #23 (2010).), but presently I speak of ‘pioneering’ implemented by the Amsterdam municipality through the establishments of *broedplaatsen*.

continuously agreeing to such precarious living and working conditions or is this a matter of survival? Referring back to the words of Audre Lorde: if guilt and defensiveness are bricks in an impenetrable wall, what then *are* the building blocks that will serve both our futures?



A photograph of a sign placed in front of Broedplaats Lely by the municipality. The sign reads: “Now, we are building new houses and facilities here and redesigning the public space. Later, this will be a lively residential and working area. For more information visit: Amsterdam.nl/Lelylaan”

Shifting Communities

Broedplaats Lely can be defined as a community of artists, but when stepping out of the *broedplaats* one could speak of the community surrounding the building; the neighborhood community of which Broedplaats Lely is a part of. And this rapidly changing neighborhood is located in the district of Nieuw-West, arguably another community. And if we continue to zoom out one could even speak of the community of Amsterdam, but the Amsterdam community is of course made up of multiple smaller communities; people who group together due to a common cultural background or religious background, or maybe through a shared hobby.

Perhaps in an attempt to counter the individualistic nature of today's urban society, there is a strong desire to refocus our attention towards community, hence the recent establishment of multiple community projects throughout the city.³⁴ Yet the concept of community remains a vague one and when used dialectally the bounds of the words' meaning tend to fluctuate, encircling shifting and ever-changing formations of humans (and non-humans). Thus, what constitutes a community and when does a group consider themselves a community? In *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, Anthony P. Cohen writes about the ambiguity of the word "community", especially when used within the discourse of social science and I will be returning to his analysis on 'community' throughout this chapter.

The reasons to form communities within society are abundant. Having a sense of belonging to a community contributes to an individual's social security; it can tackle problems such as social isolation and provides people

³⁴ Some examples of community based living projects are:

1. The Bookstore Project, an initiative realized in collaboration with different housing corporations, providing artists with affordable housing in exchange for community work. Website: <http://bookstoreproject.nl/>
2. Vooruit, an organization that provides students with housing in exchange for local community volunteer work. Website: <http://vooruitproject.nl/>
3. Housing corporation Rochdale is starting a complex called Spark Village where status holders, students and youth (until age 28) can live together and form a community: <https://www.rochdale.nl/sparkvillage/>

with contacts to turn to when in need of help or assistance. As social beings, we can easily acknowledge the benefits of being associated with a group, but this focus on community by governmental institutes is a little perplexing. Moreover, the focus on community tends to be stronger in underserved neighborhoods such as those of Nieuw-West. Whereas in wealthier areas of the city where there is a higher percentage of homeowners and where neighbors pass each other by unnoticed as well, the debate on the 'lack of community' is less present or if anything less urgent.

Clearly, it would be of a greater benefit for everyone if they felt comfortable reaching out to their neighbors when in need of assistance for whatever reason and in households where there is more financial leverage, this assistance can be sought elsewhere. Still, a governmental body encouraging citizens to care for one another is quite contradictory, especially when the social care coming from these governments is decreasing because of budget cuts.

As Paul de Bruyne and Pascal Gielen question in their book on community art,

“Is the revival of community art merely a perverted side effect of ongoing neoliberalization and the dismantling of the welfare state, or does the community now offer a powerful alternative to hyper-individualization and endless flexibility?”³⁵

To what extent can artists, through their artistic practice, contribute to the community they are or have become a part of and how does this contribution change when it is initiated through policy? Are artistic projects in peripheral neighborhoods being pushed forward because of their fundamental contributions to a community or are there other motives behind this trend? As communities are being split apart through policy banning squatting and through systems such as gentrification, simultaneously institutions and housing corporations have seemed to gain an interest in the formation of 'community' and are reserving spaces where 'community-building' should take place.

³⁵ Bruyne, Paul D., and Pascal Gielen. "Introduction: Between the Individual and the Common" *Community Art: The Politics of Trespassing*. Amsterdam: Valiz, (2011): 3

2.1 Culture as Capital

2.1.1. Grassroots Communities

In the various districts of Amsterdam there is a noticeable difference in the ways and for what reasons communal areas have been formed and one can recognize certain patterns. In the Western Garden Cities (Westelijke Tuinsteden) there are a lot of green patches of land hence one can find a variety of community gardens, often placed in shared spaces in between apartment complexes.

What is also remarkable in the district of Nieuw-West is the high number of activities organized for women only, such as gardening groups, sewing-workshops, or coffee and tea mornings. This separation into women only groups is most likely due to the high percentage of practicing Muslims in the district, bringing with it more traditionally gendered values. Many of the community centers providing these activities stress the emancipation of women and aim to give them the time and facilities for personal development³⁶. These workshops give women an opportunity to escape their household chores, to learn a craft and to meet other women from the neighborhood.

It is through the observation of such differences that we can recognize what could possibly constitute a community. As Cohen writes, “By definition, the boundary marks the beginning and end of a community (...) the boundary encapsulates the identity of the community and, like the identity of an individual, is called into being by the exigencies of social interaction.”

Within the district of Nieuw-West there is an interesting duality present, distinguishing the area from other Amsterdam districts. While social isolation is a relevant issue in the area marking the districts' character, at the same time there are many initiatives present to combat this. These organizations³⁷

³⁶ An example of a community center contributing to the emancipation of women in Nieuw-West is Vrouw & Vaart: <https://www.vrouwenvaart.nl/>

³⁷ More examples of organizations providing such spaces in Nieuw-West are:
Ru Paré: <https://www.facebook.com/ruparepodium/>
Huis van de Wijk Het Anker: <https://www.huisvandewijknieuwwest.nl/hetanker/>
The Beach: <https://www.thebeach.nu/>

provide space for local residents to form their own projects, leading to an area that is built up out of multiple intimate gatherings; where people gather to garden, sew, cook, but ultimately for the sake of coming together.

2.1.2 Cultural Injections

Concurrently there is a new collective cultural trend happening in the district. In addition to the already present community centers, in recent years there is a new type of cultural center appearing more frequently. In peripheral districts such as Nieuw-West the concentration of *broedplaatsen* has become higher. As the city center has long surpassed a comfortable population density, especially when taking the endless waves of tourists spilling into the narrowly built streets into account, the municipality has resorted to a policy of dispersion with a strong focus on one district at a time. If Amsterdam were going to remain a livable city whilst simultaneously growing in population, then its residents (and tourists) would have to spread out and for this, new accommodation would have to be arranged.

As explained in the previous chapter, Nieuw-West is a district with a lot of potential and space to grow and a district with relatively few cultural platforms. Thus, the city of Amsterdam's appointed 'culture-booster' (in Dutch: *cultuur-aanjager*) was moved from the North district of Amsterdam to the district of Nieuw-West; it was time for cultural activities in this area to start flourishing. Undoubtedly, many of the inhabitants of Nieuw-West would be thrilled to see their neighborhood gaining more cultural and leisure facilities, but what is striking is that these injections are taking place right now, while so much of the area is being converted to house a new influx of people. If more middle and higher-income households are going to be lured into the largely working-class district of Nieuw-West then the corresponding cultural and entertainment facilities will have to follow.

In her E-Flux article "Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism" the artist Martha Rosler writes about the implementation of similar "revitalization strategies". Cities that were interested in attracting corporations, invested in facilities that were desirable for the common corporate employee,

“The provision of so-called quality-of-life enhancements to attract these high earners became urban doctrine, a formula consisting of providing delights for the male managers in the form of convention centers and sports stadia, and for the wives, museums, dance, and the symphony.”

Now if we turn back to Nieuw-West, although there are a number of community centers already present in the district and a number of communities who organize their own events and gatherings³⁸ these programs are not attractive to a certain social group, a group in society for which housing is rapidly being built. Nieuw-West is receiving cultural injections at the same time as investors start erecting new buildings on their recently purchased plots of land. Rosler continues, “The search for more and better revitalization, and more and better magnets for high earners and tourists, eventually took a cultural turn, building on the success of artists’ districts in post-industrial economies.”³⁹

And it is due to this desire of putting Nieuw-West on the economic map, making it an attractive area for middle and upper-class people to move to, to invest in, to open businesses and move their organizations to, that there is a higher concentration of *broedplaatsen* in this area. For these temporary buildings, housing artists, serve as wonderful havens in limbo. These artistic pioneers can complete the necessary cultural preparation and once the urban renewal and construction plans have reached a cease-hold and everything has quieted down again, these developed areas will be ready for the influx of new

³⁸ “Weekly movie nights were being organized in a local Shisha lounge, actively attended by the neighborhoods’ teenage boys. In the many community centers there were programs like ‘coffee-mornings’ for the women living in the street, Moroccan mothers were cooking and hosting dinners for anyone who wanted to attend, there were talent shows and open-mic evenings. I spoke to a woman who met with the Antillean community of Amsterdam every month in a nearby church where they came together to sing and eat and some of the local youth told me about a few of the “hot-spots” of Nieuw-West, where according to them, people were drawn to from all over the Netherlands, especially after some famous rappers had been spotted there.”: An excerpt from a previous paper titled, *A Newcomer in the Neighborhood*, written in 2018 when I had started doing fieldwork in Nieuw-West.

³⁹ Rosler, M. “Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism, Part I”. *E-Flux. Journal #21* (2010)

households on a different social and economic scale. Artists in this sense are “not the shock troops of gentrification, but its janitorial squadron.”⁴⁰

2.1.3 Proving your Existence

Still, there is more to add to the equation of urban regeneration. For within this contemporary neo-liberal society every person, every profession, every position, needs to have a certain function. One will only receive support when proving to those facilitating support, whether it be financial or through the provision of resources, what their exact function is. When attempting to explain the importance of art it is often reduced to its societal function; art as a means of connection and reflection, art as a bridge-builder, art as a form of communal understanding. As Claire Bishop writes on “the perceived crisis of community and collective responsibility” in her introduction to the book *Participation*,

“It takes its lead from a tradition of Marxist thought that indicts the alienating and isolating effects of capitalism. One of the main impetuses behind participatory art has therefore been a restoration of the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning.”⁴¹

This perceived crisis of community and collective responsibility is one of the reasons Broedplaats Lely was allowed to come into existence - in order to become a keystone or a foundation for a community that was yet to be formed. In an area upended by construction and welcoming numerous new residents, something needed to serve as the glue or the connection between the old residents and the new ones.

Artists are notorious for their vibrant and collaborative DIY solutions; plant a collective garden here, paint a political mural there, teach your neighbors how to do pottery. But what happens when the artists are placed together in a building and no one takes the initiative to kick off this

⁴⁰ As suggested by Toscana and Kinkle, quote found in: Sholette, Gregory, and Lucy R Lippard. *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Edited by Kim Charnley. London: Pluto Press, (2017): 90

⁴¹ Bishop, Claire. “Introduction / Viewers as Producers.” In *Participation*, 10–17. Cambridge: Mit Press, 2006.

‘community building’? Are the artists, then, not taking their civil responsibility – are they failing to fulfill their social duties?

Looking at Broedplaats Lely as a case study – why is it that the community within the building remains so isolated from their surrounding environment? The answer to this question is complex and an obvious reason for the artist’s isolation from their surrounding environment is due to the cultural and socio-economic differences between the artists and their neighbors, but in the next segment I turn to and analyze the lacking intrinsic motivation of the artist in reaching out to their neighbors. Why are the artists in Broedplaats Lely not behaving as is expected of them, when at first glance it seems they are living in a perfect arrangement for artistic experimentation and community bonding?

2.2 The Artificial Community

To understand the behavior of the artists in Broedplaats Lely we need to analyze how the *broedplaats* has been formed. The fifty artists that moved into Broedplaats Lely all submitted proposals and it was on the terms of these proposals that the artists were selected. The building was to become a significant cultural contributor to the neighborhood, including public programs and events organized by the artists selected to reside in the building. Almost three years later, a small handful of artists would commit to their proposals.

In the example of the group of artists in Broedplaats Lely, Urban Resort serves as a mediator between the artist and the municipality, leading to a disconnection between autonomy or self-regulation and the artist. The artists did not join forces and claim their rights to the city, but applied through legal protocol and received a position in a building with a clear contract stating the date of entry and exit.

This forming of a community has a top-down approach: Urban Resort, following the guidelines of the municipality, makes spaces accessible for artists and selects which artists get to participate in the building they have made available. The requirements for participating in the *broedplaats* are formed by an organization, which in turn receives conditions from governmental institutions. In this structure, the artists selected to live in the *broedplaats* have no common goal, they are simply residents of the same building. This set up leaves limited space for alterations because the conditions have been previously laid out. Within the precarious and competitive housing market of Amsterdam struggling artists are grateful to find an affordable space to live and produce their work and will comply with conditions of organizations such as Urban Resort, especially when these conditions are more humane than the only other achievable housing situation, namely, temporary rental contracts.⁴²

I would like to note that I am not criticizing the application process as used by Urban Resort when selecting their artists, as I have experienced first-hand how this procedure is put into practice. The organization does a fair job

⁴² See glossary: Anti-Squat & temporary rent

of reassessing their own application procedures and attempts to select a wide variety of artists, giving a multitude of people the opportunity to experiment with their artistic practice - even though this practice does not lead to any public results or presentations; one of the employees defined this as the organization having an “introvert attitude”. Furthermore, Urban Resort maintains a personal relationship with its tenants and is very understanding of the financial difficulty their tenants may face - which is certainly necessary when the organization’s income is dependent on people earning their salary in the field of arts.

To keep their *broedplaatsen* lively, in buildings with a longer accommodation period (than the three years of Broedplaats Lely for example) the organization reassesses their applicants; possibly replacing tenants with new artists in search of spaces. This is done to prevent artists from misusing their comfortable position and idly remaining in a studio space that they no longer use as an actual studio space.⁴³ In Broedplaats Lely however, due to the considerably short rental timeframe, there is no reassessment of tenants and there is also no form of monitoring or form of control being implemented in regards to tenants realizing their proposed programs.

Yet, presently, this lack of control is surprisingly refreshing. For in a society that is structured in such a way that one must constantly legitimize their existence - where the artist must prove through applications why they are relevant and should be selected, where the *broedplaats* manager must convince the municipality what the added value is of a *broedplaats* in that exact time and space, not being monitored and having the opportunity to develop and experiment in one’s own pace has become a rarity.

When establishing the temporary *broedplaats* the artist has little autonomy over their position in regards to their new community, whether it is the community of artists in the building or the community in the surrounding area. The artist accepts to partake in a competition in order to be granted a

⁴³ In Amsterdam the social housing is in high demand and people commonly take advantage of their social-housing situation, finding loopholes in order to remain in a residence while they technically no longer apply.

space, in order to be granted the possibility to participate in the city of Amsterdam.

2.2.1 Expectations of Participation / Shifting Responsibilities

As artists are continuously encouraged to put their creative thinking to use within their surroundings, either through esthetically uplifting the neighborhood, or amusing locals through participatory projects, or through instigating change by shining a light on faulty systems, the question of where the responsibility lies in regards to caring for and potentially altering these social structures is relevant.

Many theorists point to a shift in responsibility from public or collective responsibility towards individual responsibility. Rancière writes that the “demonstrations of artists are substitute political functions” to the “shrinking of public space and effacement of political inventiveness.”⁴⁴

Artists are expected to participate in society by being essential for the reparation of communities in transition. In a Capitalist society where neo-liberalism has allowed the market system to rule itself, slowly ridding people of their social security and living rights, it is as if community art projects are society’s attempt at compensating for “the imminent breakdown of a strong social infrastructure, typical of the welfare state.”⁴⁵

In their book about community art, de Bruyne and Gielen state, “Community art becomes a cheaper form of social work, especially as it is usually offered on a project basis, whereas social services, including local schools and hospitals, call for a more serious, structural investment. It is very doubtful whether one can effectively tackle serious issues, such as social deprivation and disintegration, with temporary projects and similarly temporary responsibilities.”⁴⁶ As the authors indicate, structural issues cannot be tackled by temporary projects or temporary responsibilities. Community projects should not be used to replace social work and community art projects

⁴⁴ Rancière, Jacques. “Problems and Transformations in Critical Art.” *Participation* (2004): 83

⁴⁵ Bruyne, Paul D., and Pascal Gielen. *Community Art: The Politics of Trespassing*. Amsterdam: Valiz, (2011): 29

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 30

should not be measured on the basis of how effectively they tackle serious social issues. Yet artists continue to be instrumentalized in a variety of ways:

When attending a gathering organized by an Amsterdam based art platform and hosted by the local municipality of Nieuw-West, my position as an artist or what the function of my art could be, was once again defined by someone else (other than myself). A group of artists, academics, interested residents and municipal experts had gathered in the local town hall to speak about the changes happening in the area; the upcoming influx of middle and higher-income households and the inevitable alterations that the neighborhood would endure through this new demographic wave. That day we had left the local town hall and were doing a tour of the square in front of the building when the municipal project-planner explained that one of the issues of the neighborhood was the number of places designated as restaurants or cafés, located in prominent areas (for example a building overlooking the nearby lake) that simply remained closed, thus failing to contribute to the collective culture.

The reason, according to the project-planner, that these locations are not hastily attempting to open shop is because the owners of these buildings are patiently awaiting the large sum of money that they will receive once they sell their location; another side effect of the sky-rocketing property rates in the city. When I asked him how it was possible that such systems could occur and subsist, he responded that these property owners feel a lack of pressure in regards to their social responsibility and that “this was something in which artists could make a difference, through organizing interventions.”

Hearing the word ‘intervention’ come out of the mouth of someone employed by the municipality perplexed me, but he was quick to still my confusion, explaining to me that this was not an open invitation to squat the buildings in question, but that this *pressure* could be achieved through the creation of artistic projects. I appreciated his conviction in the power of arts as a civil mediator but failed to understand why it should be the artist that gets these proprietors to come to their senses and realize that they are wasting an

opportunity of establishing a profound gathering point, which could potentially be of great significance to the community of Nieuw-West.

So it seems that there are expectations of *how* an artist should contribute to society and in what ways these contributions should be executed. If social responsibilities are shifting from public facilities to artists, then the future of social services is looking bleak. Not to discredit the efforts of the artist, but if an artist remains a true professional then “no matter how well-intentioned their engagement may be, his or her civil action always comes second.”⁴⁷ These expectations are not only contributing to the destabilization of the structures of society but implementing these expectations in society is leading to artists becoming more and more refined in the artistry of conning rather than in the development of their artistic practice.

⁴⁷ Bruyne, Paul D., and Pascal Gielen. *Community Art: The Politics of Trespassing*. Amsterdam: Valiz, (2011): 17

2.3 The Artist's Integrity: A Vicious Circle

“On the other hand, some contributions, from the artistic as well as from the societal perspective, testify to considerable distrust. That there are governmental authorities willing to support a dose of subversion (albeit in a controllable way) casts suspicion over any kind of subsidized artistic activism. That ‘community art for sale’ is particularly pre-eminent in neoliberal regimes raises further questions about whose politics community art is serving. Living in post-Fordist⁴⁸ times might imply that the correct political thing to do for the arts is to celebrate its autonomy and retreat into an artistic exile, which (just like its counterpart) is increasingly becoming forbidden terrain because it is anti-social in tendency.”⁴⁹

Financially, the artist struggles to survive in present-day cities. Luckily, to be able to participate in urban society as an artist, systems are set up which the professional artist can make use of and apply for when in need of support. Naturally, when convincing an organization to financially support your project you need to be capable of transferring your intentions in such a way that they are assured that your project will lead to a substantial contribution to their cause.

Still, the demand for support amongst creative professionals is higher than the organizations distributing support can offer and this has simply lead to people becoming experts in adjusting proposals to fit the exact requirements of said organization, instead of ideally, finding the organization that ultimately fits their proposal. Larger institutes with more financial leverage often hire people solely with the purpose of reeling in more funding and community arts

⁴⁸ “By this, we mean a working environment ruled by economic flexibility, mental and physical mobility, project work, informality and ‘adaptivity’, such as that whipped up by the creative and cultural industries.” Ibid., 2

⁴⁹ Bruyne, Paul D., and Pascal Gielen. *Community Art: The Politics of Trespassing*. Amsterdam: Valiz, (2011): 7

buildings like Broedplaats Lely get filled with artists who do not necessarily want to be part of a community, but enthusiastically write that they do because they are in need of a place to live.

Throughout the previous years, there were multiple instances proving the lack of community involvement within Broedplaats Lely. In an attempt at creating more social cohesion within the building Urban Resort organizes gatherings for drinks every now and then, but even the free beverages and snacks cannot lure the low-earning artists out of their studios, still, very few attend. Unsurprisingly, when Urban Resort organized a communal cleaning day of the public space directly surrounding our building, very few attended as well, even though the condition of the exterior of the building is one of the tenants' most common complaints. The lack of residents organizing public programs aligns with this behavior. It is clear, after a couple of years of beating a dead horse that a majority of the tenants did not, figuratively speaking 'sign up' for community-living while in reality they actually did.

And the same mismatching of applicants and suppliers can be found within the realms of arts funding. Funding organizations stress their interest in socially oriented art projects, causing many artists to attach a social aspect to their project to increase their prospects of receiving funding.

But is this nudging of artists in the direction of social-oriented art a bad thing? Does it not force artists to break out of their isolation of which they are so often accused? After all, isolation leads to distrust and distrust leads to doubting one's integrity.

Yet simultaneously, the integrity of the artist is still doubted when applying for funding. Organizations need to test the authenticity of the artist and determine whether the artist is genuinely interested in creating an art project including social aspects – meaning that either the artists capable of transmitting their 'genuine intentions' receive funding and gain the opportunity to continue their projects, or artists capable of transmitting their in-genuine intentions in a genuine way, receive funding.

When applying for funding from a local grant organization, I presented a project that was centered on inviting neighborhood locals: In order to get a

different audience within the *broedplaats* and to break out of our artistic bubble and become a space that was of relevance to our environment. When I explained during my pitch that many people I spoke to in the neighborhood had never heard of the community building in which I reside and that this was something I wanted to change, the committee admitted that they too had never heard of Broedplaats Lely and expressed their doubt in my effectiveness towards changing this. The artist is caught in a vicious circle where their anti-social nature leads to distrust and their attempts of breaking out of isolation lead to suspicion.

2.3.1 Pushing the Boundaries

These systems put into place to support artists often tend to oppose the intrinsic nature of art, where attempting to explain what the functions are reduces the artwork to a functional object. In his book *A Restless Art*, François Matarasso writes,

“One way out of this maze is to stop identifying art as a taxonomy of *things* – forms (visual art) and objects (sculptures) – and think of it instead as an *act* with specific intentions. The act is creative because it brings into being (creates) something that did not previously exist, but art is in the act, not the thing.”⁵⁰

As the author states, art cannot be defined as an object because art is an act; it lives within the relationship between, within the intervals, it comes to life within the process of change.

Moreover, art has the tendency of being unruly and once confined to the restraints of a singular meaning - forced to fit into the shape of its enclosure, it enjoys provoking its captor and being exactly that which was not expected of it. This behavioral pattern can of course be recognized in a multitude of fields, from maturing pubescents expected to behave a certain

⁵⁰ Matarasso, François. “II What is participatory art?: Art as act.” In *A Restless Art: How participation won, and why it matters*, 36. London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, UK Branch, 2019.

way by their teachers within the confines of their classroom to anthropologists studying indigenous people responding to the policy of governing bodies.

In the case of artists, their intentions are often in conflict with the structures imposed upon them through policy. For example, when speaking to someone from the municipality about commissioning artists, they exasperatedly proclaimed that artists were difficult to work with; always doing things beyond protocol, like placing art in the public space without a license.

If the artist behaves professionally, then they are capable of detaching themselves from the artwork and creating the right circumstances for the production of art. They should be able to recognize which elements are necessary to elevate the art and considering restrictions such as licenses in public space can come across as futile in regards to the work. This is where the professionalism of the artist and the professionalism of the civil servant clash and alludes to the civil servant's desire of art conforming and contributing to present social structures, instead of potentially countering or offsetting them.

The artists in the case of Broedplaats Lely are receiving predetermined conditions in which they may *be* artists and in which they may form a community. Cohen writes, "The distinctiveness of communities and, thus, the reality of their boundaries, similarly lies in the mind, in the meanings which people attach to them, not in their structural forms."

Within current structures where society is desperately searching for ways to refill the gaps left by the dismantling welfare state, the existence of the *broedplaats* is often legitimized through its potential for social or communal reparation. Art, however, cannot and should not be defined as social work and should not be measured based on how helpful it is to society.

A municipal body strives for a well functioning and well-organized district, but cannot rely on artists or neighbors to do this organizational work for them. Ironically, as a result of the municipality recognizing the importance of communities and allowing organizations to exist because of their promise to form a useful community, artificial communities are being assembled, lacking self-regulation or motivation for collaboration because these artificial communities lack a common goal. Within this construct, those participating

receive no opportunity to create “a collective elaboration of meaning”⁵¹, as the intention or the “meaning” of the building is pre-defined. And so, arguably, the tenants in the case of Broedplaats Lely are individual artists working and living under the same roof, but cannot really be defined as a community.

Power trickles top-down as the city determines what comes where and for what amount of time, as the *broedplaats* organization determines which artists get to participate and funding organizations determine which projects will see the light of day. As an artist, in order to participate in this system, one needs to understand what it is that these organizations desire of them.

Simultaneously, because of the lack of facilities for the low-earning artist and the high numbers of artists applying, the authenticity of their applications are questioned and scrutinized; the ones that stand their ground best pass the test.

A system has been set-up to encourage space for experimentation and creation, but this system leaves little space for the artist to breathe. The artist is caught in a web - a web of financial difficulties, giving them limited possibilities of residence in the city - unachievable expectations; as they are encouraged to adopt a variety of social responsibilities - and if the artist does not prove their capabilities within the shortly given time-frame and is not granted a fresh opportunity, the artist can simply no longer participate.

*“This emphasis on meaning neatly sidesteps the definitional problems posed by the search for a structural model of community as a specific form of social organization. It demonstrates that structures do not, in themselves, create meaning for people and thus provides an effective answer to the question of why so many of the organizations designed to create ‘community’ as palliatives to anomie and alienation are doomed to failure.”*⁵²

⁵¹ Bishop, Claire. “Introduction / Viewers as Producers.” In *Participation*, 10–17. Cambridge: Mit Press, 2006.

⁵² Hamilton, Peter. “Editor’s Foreword.” In: Cohen, Anthony P.’s *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, 9. London and New York: Ellis Horwood Ltd and Tavistock Publications Ltd, 1985.

*“Despite this changing context, we can nevertheless draw attention to continuities between the participatory impulse of the 1960s and today. Recurrently, calls for an art of participation tend to be allied to one or all of the following agendas. The first concerns the desire to create an active subject, one who will be empowered by the experience of physical or symbolic participation. The hope is that the newly-emancipated subjects of participation will find themselves able to determine their own social and political reality. An aesthetic of participation therefore derives legitimacy from a (desired) causal relationship between the experience of a work of art and individual/collective agency. The second argument concerns authorship. The gesture of ceding some or all authorial control is conventionally regarded as more egalitarian and democratic than the creation of a work by a single artist, while shared production is also seen to entail the aesthetic benefits of greater risk and unpredictability. Collaborative creativity is therefore understood both to emerge from, and to produce, a more positive and non-hierarchical social model. The third issue involves a perceived crisis in community and collective responsibility. This concern has become more acute since the fall of Communism, although it takes its lead from a tradition of Marxist thought that indicts the alienating and isolating effects of capitalism. One of the main impetuses behind participatory art has therefore been a restoration of the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning.”*⁵³

⁵³ Bishop, Claire. “Introduction / Viewers as Producers” *Participation*. Cambridge: Mit Press, (2006): 10.

Art & Community: Participatory Art in Nieuw-West

Momentarily, participation is a vastly used word. Within western countries, the decreasing welfare state has brought about a sense of collective urgency to care for one another and accordingly, art reflects this. Having an inherent personal interest in producing participatory art, I started to question what was at the root of this interest. And if at its core lies the desire to repair society's withering bonds, is art then the appropriate medium to do so?

Yet, there seemed to be more behind this than the mere altruistic notion of repairing social bonds. It is not without reason that society's acceptance of participatory art leading to society's expectation of art to always include participatory elements, brings me great concern. This not only prioritizes one form of art-making over another, but it burdens art with the responsibility of fixing problems that it simply cannot. So why then, turn to this form of production if it is so inadequate?

In the district of Nieuw-West, where socially oriented art is widely present, I followed and spoke with a few initiators of such projects and observed and sometimes participated in their projects to understand how these artworks relate to the community.

3.1 Defining Participatory Art

Participatory art is a complex category as it dips into different fields of professionalism and remains ambiguous when considering who or which community the art is actually serving. For there is art that centers around social issues prevalent within a community, art that is made in collaboration *with* a community, art that is produced *for* a community- but in each example, when questioning whom the art is serving, the context of *where* the artwork can be encountered and *what* the artwork is, is of relevance.

To make this more concrete, the question of whom art is serving is arguable when: artwork can be dealing with the poverty of a certain community as its subject but can lose its potential momentum when it is exclusively encountered in a renowned artistic institution. For the audience, who most likely has little to do with poverty, will be temporarily affected, but will afterward return to their normal state of affairs.

Or, an artwork made in collaboration with a community could be using that community as subjects or as material for the work: Think of Christoph Schlingensiefel's controversial work *Please Love Austria – First Austrian Coalition Week* where asylum seekers were placed in a setting similar to the Big Brother TV-show and could be 'voted out' by Austrian residents. The winner could potentially gain asylum through marrying an (volunteering) Austrian citizen. Surely this art project did not serve the majority of that specific group of refugees.

Even the seemingly harmless gesture of an artist, painting a classic mural on the façade of an apartment block in a city suburb, can be questioned – for has the artist served the community if their creative presence has brought with it the onslaught of gentrification?

These examples present the difficulty behind claiming *whom* art serves and *what* it serves as. For the intended or unintended 'services' that can be a result of art projects working with people are just one of the components that the artwork is comprised of. After all, art is not synonymous with public service.

When studying different examples of artworks stepping out of the art world and including communities outside of the field within their process, I ran into a multitude of titles describing these projects: community art, participatory art, relational-art, socially engaged art and more. In order to achieve clarity and consistency when writing about the various projects I observed throughout my research, I will refer to them as ‘participatory art’ projects.

In his book *A Restless Art*, François Matarasso defines participatory art as “the creation of art by professional artists and non-professional artists.” He deliberately chooses to define it as broadly as possible with the intention to allow the definition to encompass a variety of forms of art-making, such as activist-art, community-art, street art, institutional collaborations, etc., as long as the process includes co-creation between people in the professional and non-professional field.

To specify what I mean when I write about ‘participatory art’ I would like to include Nicolas Bourriaud’s perception of ‘relational art’. Bourriaud defines this as “an art that takes as its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and its social context”. Furthermore, in their book *Community Art*, authors de Bruyne & Gielen state that “all art is relational” as “there is always a relationship with a public necessary” thus narrowing the definition down to when an artist “actively seeks a relationship with the public and attempts to engage it in a dialogue.”⁵⁴

I prefer to speak of ‘participatory art’ over ‘community art’ when analyzing the following case studies. Although the surrounding community is always an element of the creational process of these projects, in some cases the communities are replaceable for other communities or the projects are executed with a variety of communities. In some cases, the presentation of the artworks is within the institutions and in others, the institutions presented work within the community. All projects do, however, include the production

⁵⁴ de Bruyne, Paul, and Pascal Gielen. “Mapping Community Art.” In *Community Art: The Politics of Trespassing*. 17. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2011

of art with non-professionals within their process and create a new environment for learning and understanding.

Below are the observations of participatory art projects set in Nieuw-West and reflected against current structures within society. This analysis follows the processes of such projects and the gestures they make within their environment, more so than evaluating their artistic quality. A few of the projects are ongoing and yet to be completed, so whether “symmetry has been achieved between the community and the art” and only then “does the expressive form have a claim in the professional art world”⁵⁵ this, I will leave up to the reader to decide. I followed these artistic projects that attempted to engage the surrounding community in dialogue – about art, about their lives, about the issues that arise when living in a neighborhood in the midst of transition.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 21.

3.2 Searching for Common Ground

*“Exhibitions of contemporary art create free spaces and periods of time whose rhythms are not the same as those that organize everyday life, and they encourage an inter-human intercourse which is different to the ‘zones of communication’ that are forced upon us. The contemporary social context restricts opportunities for interhuman relations in that it creates spaces designed for that purpose.”*⁵⁶

This quote, taken from Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*, is interesting when applied to the current context of Amsterdam and when analyzing participatory artworks seeking a dialogue between institutions and the community of Nieuw-West. Building upon the theory that we are currently witnessing the ‘third wave’ of gentrification, gentrification asserted through policy; how does contemporary art relate to the current free-spaces and what could contemporary art potentially teach us about the current creation of free-spaces by the city of Amsterdam?

In a tightening city where the free space - empty, unoccupied and undetermined plots of land and buildings are vanishing faster than civilians can cope with, the current policymakers are attempting to construct a plan for the establishment and maintenance of free spaces. For it has become apparent to several people that through the disintegration of free spaces, with it disappears the mental ‘free space’ of new creation.

The concept of free-spaces sprouting into existence through policy is, of course, a paradox in itself and when attending a gathering called “Social Capital”⁵⁷, Amsterdam’s senior urban planner rightfully asked, “How to plan that which should not be planned?”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Bourriaud, Nicolas. “Relational Aesthetics.” *Participation*, 1998, 160.

⁵⁷ The program “Social Capital #2: Amsterdam-West” was organized by TAAK in collaboration with LIMA. Take from the flyer: “Amsterdam is expanding rapidly because of economic and social forces. As a result, the public domain is under increasing pressure. Despite regulations,

Undetermined spaces lead to unexpected encounters, unexpected encounters are at the basis of experimentation, and experimentation can lead to new understandings and realizations, which can ultimately be of great service to a community. This train of thought is at the core of legitimizing the existence of art in society today and has led to policy implementing ‘zones’ where this experimentation should take place.

Going back to Bourriaud’s quote, how can we relate to ‘free space’ as created by contemporary art when the literal free space in which the artist is creating has been fabricated through policy? How do artists attempt to break away from forced-upon ‘zones of communication’ through current artistic practice? If contemporary participatory art aims to bring about connectivity between a variety of people, in what ways do artists create common ground and what does this creation of common ground give to a community?

3.2.1 Crossing borders

In their book *Community Art*, de Bruyne and Gielen write about community participants, “The fact that the people participating are often not professionals, not even art connoisseurs per se, only serves to further delineate the territory concerned.” In Matarasso’s *A Restless Art*, he as well refers to the nature of participatory art as cutting across “the art world’s conceptual and administrative boundaries.” In both examples, the authors speak of the border of the profession of art being reached and thereafter, breached. The result of this passing of boundaries leads to the entering of a new space resting in between different categories or genres.

In order to collaborate with non-professionals, a different language or forms of communication need to be used to achieve mutual understanding. During the process of creation, the participatory art project steps out of the art space, leaving behind its jargon and concepts, and works together with people who have different backgrounds and other expertise. Sometimes, the result of

monoculture, and commodification, how can we continue to see public space as a place for imagination and adventure?”

⁵⁸ Said by the cities senior urban planner, Julian Jansen.

such works might be brought back within the art world and presented in ways familiar to artistic institutions, but the process always dips into unknown territory.

For the professional artist as well as the non-professional participant, a practice of learning and unlearning starts to take place. Both must cast their expectations aside and find ways of working together in order to create together. When the artists choose to step outside of the art-world and introduce people whom, through structures in society, are far removed from it, can this be seen as an attempt of ‘re-commoning’ or as a redistribution of art from elitist institutions into the hands of the community?

If *broedplaatsen* are introduced in an area with the intention of expanding the city center by luring its inhabitants to the periphery, thus serving as catalysts of gentrification, what happens when the artist directs their attention towards the periphery instead? Is this a way for the artist to respond and potentially diverge the movements of gentrification, which has the tendency of neglecting the economically oppressed – or is the artist complying with the role of becoming the welfare state’s janitorial squadron?⁵⁹

Matasarro alludes to the polarizing effects of institutions, writing that “Modern societies organise themselves through ever-more sophisticated (and therefore exclusive) fields of thought, policy and activity,” and that, “participatory art reaches across those boundaries to invite new collaborations.⁶⁰” In a time of growing polarization, when searching for common ground with people outside of one’s own socio-economic bubble and combining this with contemporary non-hierarchical thinking, the artist is stepping out of their comfort zone and attempting to create a new space, for new potential, and for new collaboration.

⁵⁹ Sholette, Gregory, and Lucy R Lippard. *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Edited by Kim Charnley. London: Pluto Press, (2017): 90

⁶⁰ Matarasso, François. “The normalization of participatory art.” In *A Restless Art*: 26. London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, UK Branch, 2019.

3.2.2 Sharing Power

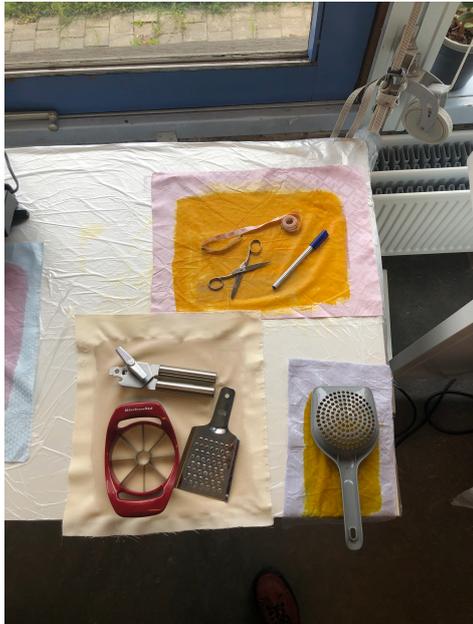
After having crossed the border of one's own space of understanding, or zone of knowledge, and having reached out towards another to form a new space of understanding, this act can bring with it a temporary rearrangement of power. Artists suddenly finding themselves in spaces outside of their artistic environment can suddenly be confronted with the arrogance of the "art-world" they came from or the ignorance that people can have towards unequally divided opportunities and possibilities.

This became apparent to me when assisting De Appel during their public events, especially at the start of Broedplaats Lely in 2017. Irritated and disoriented audience members would ask me when De Appel would be moving back to the city center. The distance they had to travel and the aesthetics of the neighborhood and slightly dilapidated appearance of the building were not what they were accustomed to when visiting an exhibition of a contemporary art institute. To these audience members, the physical appearance was not correlating with the status they attributed to an institute such as De Appel. In the mean time De Appel, of course, having left their previous space in the center as a result of government cultural budget cuts, was very aware of their precarious situation and was doing their best to reinvent themselves as an arts institute within their new environment.

In an interview with David Smeulders, the curator of De Appel's Education Programme, he acknowledged the use of artistic institutes as stimulants of gentrification and felt it was of importance for institutes to be aware of their position within these processes and to take a clear stance within this system. For him, the educational program is their response.

Just as De Appel's regular visitors needed time to adjust to their new location, De Appel needed time to acquaint and integrate the institution within the neighborhood. Slowly projects started to develop that were created with or presented in surrounding spaces in the area. Through De Appel's educational programme different groups of people, school children and residents from the neighborhood were invited to participate through sharing common interests or issues.

David's work as a curator is to connect artists from De Appel to organizations and groups in Nieuw-West and he does this through linking 'fields of interest'. For example, for a textile-based project within De Appel that will be produced by the artist Hanna Miletic, David and the artist went around the neighborhood to explore local sewing studios.



Images captured during one of the workshops by Hanna Miletic, demonstrating the technique of sun printing.

Miletić, who is trained as a photographer, was looking to collaborate with local inhabitants who have affiliation with the craft of textile. Together with participants, she is producing work using the technique of sun printing; after brushing on the developing liquid, objects that are then placed on the fabric leave an imprint, which is then developed through the use of sunlight. For this project the expertise, but more importantly, the stories of others are of great relevance to the artist.

It is within the collaboration of Miletić's project that objects become evocative, literally placed in the spotlight, the objects leave an imprint on a textile and become the symbol of a story otherwise unheard. Matassaro writes "At its best, participatory art creates a space in which all can speak and be heard, where our pain and our hopes can be shared, where we can build common ground and ways of working together, where our creativity and empathy might find better ways of living. And in doing that, it might be specially valuable in the places too small or weak to be noticed by power."⁶¹ The collaboration with local people from sewing studios not only celebrates a craft that is dear to them, but forms a patchwork of individual stories participating as one piece.

Another artist inspired by the stories of her surroundings is playwright and producer, Hanna Timmers. Commissioned by the cultural organization Frascati and housing corporation Rochdale, Timmers together with her colleague Luca van Slagmaat, composed a series of plays titled *Radio van Deysse*.

Frascati was looking for a suitable producer for a location in the Van Deysse neighborhood in Nieuw-West, where housing corporation Rochdale maintains a large section of the buildings. Timmers, who lives right next to the Van Deysse area, has an instinctive interest in creating works outside of the orthodox theater settings. The plays (imitating radio shows) in which local inhabitants also participate, tell the stories of the people from the neighborhood.

⁶¹ Matarasso, François. "Definitions" In *A Restless Art*: 47. London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, UK Branch, 2019.

The broadcasting of the stories of the inhabitants of Nieuw-West and placing these stories in an artistic-cultural context is a political act in itself. “But the artist’s act has intention, even if it is unconscious, confused, deceptive, or ambiguous. The meaning may be no more than ‘look at this’, but that is already a powerful statement.”⁶² For the individual stories of the local residents of Nieuw-West, stories of families of migrant backgrounds, stories of the working class, stories of people affected by gentrification, are underrepresented in mainstream or ‘high-culture’ media, while the urgencies they experience can be of relevance to us all.

3.2.3 Empower

*“Art is a power, not a good. Participatory art can empower people, but good results are not guaranteed.”*⁶³

The above-mentioned artistic producers are interested in working with the narratives of people in their surroundings and elevating the unheard stories or issues of the inhabitants of Nieuw-West. By doing so, these artists give power to the participants of the artistic projects, but a step further is to give the participants the tools for taking this power themselves: to empower.

Artist Fouad Lakbir, born and raised in the Kolenkit neighborhood, bordering the district of Nieuw-West, is working hard to give the youth of the area tools for self-regulation through creative personal development. I was introduced to him through the storytelling evenings he organizes, *Stories From Nieuw-West*⁶⁴ where local storytellers give their reflections on the urgencies in their daily lives. But as one of the initiators behind *Shokkin’ Group NL*, a foundation that focuses on the personal and societal development through creative

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Matarasso, François. “Causes and Consequences” In *A Restless Art*: 29. London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, UK Branch, 2019.

⁶⁴ *Verhalen Uit Nieuw-West* take place in New Metropolis, a branch of cultural organization Pakhuis de Zwijger, located in Nieuw-West.

exchanges, he coaches and trains the many bi-cultural youths of the neighborhood.

As a son of Moroccan migrants, he understands why the threshold is high in regards to creative expression amongst youth with a migrant background. He states that these youth have to work twice as hard to participate in this society and since professions in creativity are not financially beneficial, this in combination with social pressure causes them to never develop their creative expression. He not only gives these youth the skills to develop on a personal level but also passes on the baton as a number of these youth get coached to continue their creative development through teaching others.

Diana Krabbendam is one of the people behind The Beach, a sustainability design studio that has been located in Nieuw-West for the last ten years. Krabbendam was educated as a designer and had a personal interest in activism and social issues. She was curious to find out if she could combine these skills to contribute to a positive change in society. For her, when the projects she helped initiate manage to operate without the help of their organization and sustain themselves, then a goal has been reached.

One of the projects that succeeded in functioning independently is a group of female chefs called, *De Wilde Chefs (The Wild Chefs)*. The formation of this group was the result of one of the first issues The Beach confronted when first moving into the area, finding a way to gather the many people (especially women) who spent a lot of time isolated in their homes.

When reflecting the achievements of these artistic processes against the current structures of for example Broedplaats Lely, which fails to make a substantial contribution to their community, it is interesting to analyze in what ways these structures differ. Controlling the opportunity to reside and create at a location and simultaneously expecting people to take their full responsibility in caring for their environment is quite contradictory. Strictly regulating the time and space of people in a certain place is behaving patronizingly towards

that group of people and underestimates their capabilities of self-governance and self-regulation.

As Joshua Decter argues, “communities that do rebuild, in partnership with governmental and private entities, need to be given the sufficient legal basis to control their own destinies in terms of protections and rights.”⁶⁵ If citizens do not receive control over their own destinies, then every form of help is merely a form of alleviation.

In order to reach the women of the neighborhood, Diana Krabbendam from the Beach purchased a number of small ovens and slowly more and more women would leave their house to join the growing group for bread baking. At a certain point, one of the women suggested that she could do more than baking bread and asked if they could start cooking together. This evolved into weekly neighborhood dinners. Once one of the women suggested a better oven was needed an outdoor bread oven was constructed. Currently the group of chefs now even runs their own catering company. The Beach, recognizing the potential already present in the neighborhood, offered women the tools, facilities and knowledge to continue autonomously.

⁶⁵ Decter, Joshua. “Art and the Cultural Contradictions of Urban Regeneration, Social Justice and Sustainability: Transforma Projects and Prospect.1 in Post-Katrina New Orleans” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, no. 22 (2009): 16-34

3.3 A Friendly Intruder: Trusting each other

When working with participants from outside the field of arts discovering the ways to work together is of great importance. These artists not only need to gain the trust of the potential participants but also need to trust their ability to participate. Building this trust towards the ability of community members to self-govern and self-regulate can be brought about through the staging of encounters, by creating places of exchange between new groups of people. Furthermore, consistency and time are crucial elements for building strong relationships with participants and for creating an environment in which all participants can feel comfortable to create and learn together.

3.3.1 Creating new spaces

“These artists produce relational space-times, interhuman experiences that try to shake off the constraints of the ideology of mass communications; they are in a sense spaces where we can elaborate alternative forms of sociability, critical models and moments of constructed conviviality.”⁶⁶

When speaking with the initiators of these art projects, in order to get the attention of potential participants and to engage them in dialogue, this worked most effectively by introducing minor interruptions.

Bourriaud uses the word ‘interstice’. Used as well by Karl Marx to describe “trading communities that escaped the framework of the capitalist economy,” an interstice as defined by Bourriaud is “a space in social relations, which, although it fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, suggests possibilities for exchanges other than those that prevail within the system.”

In the case of De Appel, David searches for participants within a mutual field of interest, approaching and entering groups who are more likely to

⁶⁶ Bourriaud, Nicolas. “Relational Aesthetics.” *Participation*, 1998, 166.

collaborate because of their connection to a subject or a theme. Once onboard, however, this collaboration serves as an interstice. Take, for example, the sewing-groups approached by David and the artist Hanna Miletic; although approached and contacted through the basis of their skill, the collaboration leads to completely new encounters. Not only do these various sewing groups meet new people, neighbors with a shared hobby, but they also step out of the daily routine of their craft through learning a new technique, in this case, the technique of sun-printing.

For the *Radio van Deysel* plays, Hanna Timmers uses a slightly different approach when searching for members of the community to participate in a dialogue. Instead of approaching people through common subjects, she had to find ways to get people to approach her. She explains that she achieves this through staging ‘consistent interventions’.

Commissioned by housing corporation Rochdale, Timmers received the assignment to create a piece with inhabitants about the subject of ‘poverty’. Timmers describes the first time she had a thorough look around the neighborhood in which she was to start this collaborative project, “I thought to myself – how to make something about poverty here? I can’t just walk up to people who don’t know me and simply ask them, are you poor?”

For the first play, similar to David who enters the spaces of groups as a guest, Timmers followed the housing corporation’s neighborhood-watch Faisal around and joined him on his daily complaint calls by local residents. But after the realization of this first play, in which Timmers, although trained as a theater director did all of the acting, felt that a different path should be taken to reach the stories of the residents.

With the financial help of Rochdale, Timmers and her colleagues start working together with a mobile-bakery which they park outside of their mini-theater every Thursday. The sight of this unusual caravan sparks the curiosity of the neighbors who enter and join in the activity of kneading dough, but as Timmers acknowledges, it was more a matter of drinking tea and speaking with one another than the actual activity of baking bread.

For Timmers the consistency of this ‘intervention’ is of great importance. To build a relationship, the locals need to understand that they can expect to find her and the mobile-bakery there every week. If one week does not lead to an interesting story that can be used as material for a production, it is not a lost effort according to the artist, because the residents still signaled their presence and understanding the consistency of their presence builds trust.

What Timmers is doing by placing a mobile-bakery on a sidewalk is laying out the frameworks in which new encounters will take place. During our interview Timmers confesses that it was much easier to get the local residents to step into the mobile-bakery than it was into their mini-theater right next door. Although the space was nothing but an empty shop before having been converted into a theater, the context of the theater served as a symbolic barrier. The mobile-bakery is an interstice, a small, but pragmatic interruption in people’s daily lives and served as the canvas of the painting, or as Hanna Timmers the play write defines it; as the rehearsals of the play. When people choose to step into the caravan they all become potential components of an artwork and it is up to the artistic producer, to compose, curate and decide where the components will be placed within the artwork.

3.3.2 Time to Grow

One of the problems of the current implementation of creative communities is that these spaces are pre-determined spaces of creative expression of which the services to the community must quickly be reaped. To continue the metaphor in gardening jargon- the cultivation system of permaculture, deriving from the word *permanent*, is currently favored due to its renewable resources and self-sustaining ecosystem. In the practice of permaculture, gardeners observe the powers and strengths of an area and create an environment to stimulate the growth of the already present plants.

In order to create a more sustainable *cultural* eco-system and sustainable communities, both will need space for self-sustenance and space and time to grow. In a documentary about the quickly expanding trend of

flexible and temporary living regulations in the Netherlands, the researcher Roel Griffioen stands on a plot of land and points to portable gardens, placed in crates with wheels attached underneath. He tells the viewers that this plot of land has recently been purchased by an investor and since it was known that it would be empty for a limited time, the plot of land needed a temporary activity. Whilst observing these portable gardens Griffioen reminds us that this concept never received the opportunity to ground itself, the roots of the plants are kept together above the soil, with no possibility of growing into the earth below it. This community garden can be wheeled away when policy sees fit.⁶⁷

Diana Krabbendam from the Beach states in an interview that, “When dealing with the personal situations of people you need to build real relationships with them and gain their trust.” In order to do so, according to her, working from one location was essential. She is thankful that the organization has been able to remain in the same location in Nieuw-West for the last ten years as an established organization. For her, this is a reason to pay more rent and, ideally, to be out of the temporary rent system.

It is not without reason that artists such as Hanna Timmers stress the importance of consistency when working with members of the community. When there was not enough financial leverage anymore to cover the cost of the mobile-bakery, Timmers and her colleagues had to come up with other creative interventions and to this day the neighbors still ask if the bakery will be returning.

Artist and initiator, Fouad Lakbir, mentions his desire of making his organization more sustainable and finding partners who want to help support them for longer periods because, to quote Fouad, “what we do in these kinds of neighborhoods needs a lot of patience and space for experimentation.”

When asked about the future location of De Appel, as the current location Broedplaats Lely will remain until 2020, David acknowledged that, although De Appel would love to remain in Nieuw-West after having built such

⁶⁷ *Alles Flex? The Future of Work*: <https://vimeo.com/167414979>

strong bonds with the surroundings, the institution does not have the financial leverage to be picky about where they would go next in a city with unaffordable property rates.

It is clearly extremely difficult for people and organizations to develop substantial projects connecting with communities if the spaces and support they receive are so temporary.

3.3.3 Learning and Unlearning

When asked if contemporary art was too difficult to comprehend for the children of the neighborhood or if one had to be highly educated to understand art, David's answer was firm, "No, I cannot agree with that." He continued to say that he believed there were many misconceptions about contemporary art and that it was a matter of finding a subject that interests you specifically. "I also don't go to every exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum, for example. I go when I think it sounds interesting and I definitely want to see it because I believe it contributes to my personal development."

Hanna Timmers, who teaches theater to youth and has produced many plays with young actors, describes the flexibility that is needed when working with people who are not professionals in the field. During the creation of *Radio van Deysse* she became well acquainted with a young girl living further down the street and had a large role in the production. This girl who had a gift for acting also, unfortunately, had a habit of not turning up to their scheduled rehearsals and Timmers and colleagues had to sometimes resort to pulling her out of bed to get her onto the stage.

However, captivated by the relationship Timmers had built with this girl, she took the risk of collaborating with her again, this time for a production in the Amsterdam City Theater. In an interview with Timmers she tells me proudly that, although the girl's attendance of the rehearsals was unsteady, she showed up and performed in all seventeen plays.

When working with participants from outside the field of arts discovering the ways to work together is of great importance. Just as David acknowledges that

everyone can have an individual perspective on art, Diana Krabbendam from the organization The Beach, states, “everyone is an expert in something, if not, then at least in their own lives.”

In a sense, when starting a process, an artist never knows what the complete outcome of an artwork will be, but in the field of participatory art, the artist must let go of any preceding expectations.

When I ask Hanna Timmers what she learned from producing the theater plays in the Van Dessyel neighborhood, she answers that, “Things always turn out differently than expected,” and that it is of importance to “always let go of any expected outcomes you might have.” According to the artist, when working with non-professionals and being open towards their unexpected abilities, only then will you be capable of producing an interesting artwork.

When working with non-professional participants the artist must be open to alternative or new forms of production, which means they must be capable of unlearning their previous notions of producing art. When Diana Krabbendam from the Beach started experimenting with combining sustainable design and social issues, she quickly discovered that in order to do so, the design processes she was accustomed to, needed to be completely redesigned. Each process needed to be adjusted to each specific issue and so each new project brought with it a new learning process. She describes the organization as one large research.

All the above-mentioned initiators take the participants of their projects seriously and are curious to uncover their perspectives through collaborating with them. A method mentioned by Matasarro, who suggests analyzing the process of art through the eyes of young children, proves how meaningful it can be to work with people outside of one’s own expertise:

“Art’s importance is easier to see if we consider how children use it as a playroom for coming to terms with their existence. They draw, sing, narrate, dance, perform, invent, paint and play in creative interaction with their daily

experience. Skill or control is unimportant, at least in early years, because for children art is principally a method, a way of being in the world.”⁶⁸

The projects observed actively choose to participate in a process of unlearning and by doing so they attempt to let go of the control we obtain when growing older. The artist approaches the production of participatory art as a space for creation and for new collective understandings. By letting go of what was previously known and working without expectations the possibility to learn and understand each other remains.

“Contemporary art is about the society in which we live and which we are all a part of, whether we want to be or not. We all experience things in our lives, we watch the news or read, even children understand to a certain extent what is happening in the world. So we are well informed and aware of the changes happening in our society, whether we get it from the media or through our own perception, but contemporary art tells us something about it, about those changes and certain aspects of our lives that everyone can relate to in some sense. Not always, but most of the time, because we are all living on this same planet.”

- David Smeulders

⁶⁸ Matarasso, François. *A Restless Art: How participation won, and why it matters*, 36. London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, UK Branch, 2019.

3.4 More than just an artwork

“But what’s the point of this?” one of the women asks, holding on to the tip of one of the tablecloths. “I’ll get to that in a bit,” Patricia answers, who is in the middle of her introduction on the project in which these women are participating. The artist just explained that the different cloths spread out over the tables, already starting to feel heavy from the growing number of tiny beads, had been sewn on by numerous women; women in Senegal, women from a nearby neighborhood in Amsterdam, Bos & Lommer and now they lay in front of a group of women in Osdorp. Patricia continues her explanation. The idea is that we continue the process of embroidery and while we stitch we can let our thoughts go, relax and join in conversation. “Oh, so that’s the point,” says the woman, still awaiting her answer.

A majority of the women sitting around the table are Turkish and for many of them the embroidery is an easy activity. In between them they chat a lot in Turkish and when they realize that not everyone at the table can understand they briefly continue the conversation in Dutch, before automatically switching back to their mother tongue. Two little boys join the table and get to practice embroidery on a test piece. They’re the grandchildren of one of the women sitting at the table. Soon the conversation is about the women’s families, about how many children they have, how old they are – one woman’s son is excelling in football while another woman’s daughter studies at the University of Amsterdam. Pictures of their families are being displayed on their cellular phones.

Whilst chatting, the small beads are being threaded onto the needles. Did the women in Senegal talk about the same things – about their children and their teenagers going through puberty? I have to think of the renowned seamstresses of Chanel, who decorate the garments sequin by sequin. What do they talk about during all those hours of delicate work? Women in a group, women in a circle, trained for decades in this intricate craft.

It’s nice that the woman who asked what the point was accepted “letting your mind wander and getting into conversation with each other” as the point of it all. (Field note entry, Vrouw & Vaart: June 11th, 2019)

On the day of this field note entry, I had participated in a workshop organized by De Appel and hosted by the artist Patricia Kaersenhout. For an exhibition that is taking place in De Appel in the fall of 2019, Kaersenhout is collaborating with different groups of women who are contributing to the artwork through embroidery. On the day of this workshop, we had traveled to a community center for women only in the neighborhood of Osdorp in Nieuw-West. The embroidered fabrics will be placed on tables set up similarly to the installation *The Dinner Party* (1979), by feminist artist Judy Chicago. In Judy Chicago's installation a triangular-shaped dinner table is set and written on each nameplate is the name of an important woman who did not receive the historical recognition they deserved. Kaersenhout comments on Chicago's work by taking it one step further and placing nameplates of only Women of Color.

As Kaersenhout makes clear when explaining the background of the project to the new group of women participating, the idea behind the embroidery is more than just producing a physical work together, but to share stories and to connect through experience.

The artistic producers I observed during this research all agree that there is more happening within these projects than solely an exchange on an artistic level. David mentions, in regards to the textile project with Hanna Miletić, that the introduction between the different sewing-studios is in itself of great value. Hanna Timmers, who brought a group of youth from the Van Deysseel neighborhood on a field trip to watch their friend perform (for some of which it was the first time in the Amsterdam City Theater), said that this was something she did outside of her work hours, as an act of human decency.

For these producers, the exchanges that occur surrounding the production and the presentation of the artwork are of more relevance than the art-object itself. The artwork acts as a translation of the encounters that occurred throughout the process of creation and when the work is placed in a particular setting it can lead to yet again, new exchanges and encounters.

As I sat with Hanna Timmers in the mini-theater, an old corner-store with large windows, she often has to pause the interview to greet passers-by

stepping inside briefly to say hello. Clearly, after almost a year of being in the Van Deyssel neighborhood, she has become engrained within the community. She explains to me that she has a lot of contact with people from the neighborhood, people who speak to her every time they see her, but who have still never attended one of the plays. For them, these consistent forms of connection are more than enough.

And it is the responsibility of the perceiver to be open and bear witness to those exchanges and unexpected outcomes. When Hanna Miletić's workshop took place in Broedplaats Lely in one of the studios of De Appel, where participants from local sewing studios gathered and met each other for the first time, I noticed a small activity that I found thrilling. After this first workshop, where the participants were introduced to the sun-printing technique and all gave their personal accounts of their passion for the craft of textile, I noticed that a few of the women had meandered over to the other side of the hallway and had entered the studios of Steim (Electronic Sound studio). One of Steim's colleagues was showing them his intricately made audio sculptures that can produce sensational sounds through subtle vibrations, like dipping a finger into a pool of water or through gently tapping the sculpture's material.

Seeing this encounter made clear to me that by personally inviting people into the *broedplaats*, intriguing them through a subject within their field of interest, can be enough to get people to cross the symbolic threshold that may have prevented them from entering before.

Furthermore, once this new audience has stepped foot over the threshold the step towards exploring subjects outside of their field of interest becomes easier. This particular group of women, invited by a contemporary art institute, entered the building because of their interest in working with fabric but their curiosity led them to receive a display of sound-art from an organization that maneuvers within a very specific electronic sound niche.

These initiators are, in a sense, curators of new encounters. They create spaces, physical and non-physical where new exchanges occur. De Bruyne & Gielen write “Certainly a community art project has only ‘succeeded’ when it realizes an interaction between participants and the artist and wider community at which it was aimed,” and this is precisely what these artistic producers are doing, as the previous example of the sewing-groups entering the *broedplaats* illustrates. Or, to give another example, Fouad Lakbir, who has a position in two different cultural worlds living side by side in the same country. He can clearly recognize what causes this segregation and works with forms of creative communication so that both groups can understand each other and speak a common language.

Hanna Timmers specifies that the atmosphere during the shows is best when the audience is a balanced mix of local inhabitants and residents from the city center. Then, according to her, there is excitement in the air and even the performers are at their best.

“While the socially engaged artist, with all good intentions, thought he was fighting against injustice in the world, he finds himself at the service of the power which maintains the injustice.”

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I wanted to conclude this chapter by returning to the public debate about the relevance behind artists working with communities. If “Artistic movements can be understood only in connection with social processes,”⁷⁰ then it is clear that there is a societal craving for communal reparation.

Although, as a society, we can learn a lot from the ways these artistic projects develop and analyze the methods applied that lead to communal bonding or a collective elaboration of meaning, simultaneously these projects fail to survive due to insufficient funding, space and time.

⁶⁹ Bruyne, Paul D., and Pascal Gielen. *Community Art: The Politics of Trespassing*. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2011

⁷⁰ Canclini, Néstor G. *Art beyond Itself: Anthropology for a Society without a Story Line*. Durham University Press, (2014): xi

I am not under the impression that the artists observed are using their art to simply “fight against injustice in the world”, for they all share an inherent passion for continuously working with the new and learning through dialogue and new experiences. When regarding art as a valuable activity and not as a valuable object, we can create space for learning together and ultimately share tools for self-expression and self-sufficiency. Nevertheless, as these professionals are aware, it is of utter importance to understand one’s position in this current economic system and to test in which ways we are contributing to society, as artists and as members of a community.

Conclusion

Just like a multitude of other major cities across the world, the city of Amsterdam is currently dealing with the effects caused by gentrification and policy is implemented in order to combat issues such as sky rocketing rent prices, leading to the city becoming uninhabitable for a large group of society. A frequent member of this low-earning group for whom the city is becoming more and more inaccessible, is the artist, for whom a *broedplaatsen* policy has been put into place. Yet, such policies are never carried out without consequences and this research has focused on the effects current societal expectations are having on the artist and how people within this professional field maneuver within contemporary transitioning systems.

Let the observations of the artistic projects within this research serve as examples, not in what they achieve artistically or how well they connect with the community, but through the observation of their processes. The support given to any field of profession is often legitimized through proving their function to society and in the case of the arts, reserving and supporting space for creation is often justified through the potential art has for communal reparation. This in combination with policy recognizing the economic advantages of placing artists in certain areas of the city has brought us into the “third-wave” of gentrification and it is the reason the artist is currently situated where they are.

The artist *may* temporarily inhabit an area in a transitioning state, paving the way for middle and higher-income households and simultaneously be of service to the already present communities. Within this set-up, however, the artist is being instrumentalized and only receives the opportunity to participate if deemed “useful”, as defined by current policy.

Yet, art projects and artists should not have the responsibility of being the glue that binds communities in the midst of transition. Community building can turn out to be a potential byproduct- an unexpected outcome- of an artwork, but ironically, this ‘connection’ will not occur when it *is* the expected outcome. Pushed into the category of ‘community’ through policy,

funding, and *broedplaatsen*, the artist is being judged on their ability to participate in and serve the community while art, in itself, is not a service.

Just as the artist producing work with communities understands that they must rid themselves of expected outcomes, in this way organizations striving to form community should be wary of offering structures with pre-determined conditions. When producing participatory art, the artist engages with the collaborators in a process of learning and unlearning. A new space for collaboration is brought into place where the creation of art can be redefined and where art can momentarily be shed of its institutional or socially dominant understandings.

The turn to community and participation is a result of societies' perception of declining collectivity or a lack of connections, but as Anthony P. Cohen makes clear, "community exists in the minds of its members (...) and not in their structural forms." If the meaning is pre-determined then it leaves no space for the participants to form their own meaning. Thus organizations interested in creating communities can provide space for a community to grow, but should refrain from providing the structures or form that define the community.

Broedplaats Lely is a conglomeration of artists and organizations with a wide variety of artistic expression, a chaotic mix of creativity. After moving in, in 2017, it took a few years for many of the artists to find their place in the *broedplaats* and their position regarding the surrounding community. As people come in a variety of forms, a few were naturally curious and immediately started exploring their new surroundings, incorporating the neighborhood into their artworks, but many more needed some time to adjust and to ground themselves. Slowly its residents are starting to break out of their 'eccentric bubble' and as neighbors become accustomed to the fact that within this old school resides a group of artists, time has brought about a few creative exchanges between the *broedplaats* and neighboring organizations.

This research has allowed me to follow and analyze the progress already made by organizations working artistically and collaborating with their surrounding area, helping me to recognize patterns or similar tactics applied

when building new relationships with people outside of the artistic field. Applying an ethnographic lens to my own surroundings helped me to understand which systems were occurring within the building I reside, reflected against a larger discourse on current gentrification and participation.

Following participatory art projects in the neighborhood made clear that for genuine relationships to start growing, time, space and self-sustenance are necessary. In the example of a *broedplaats* a space or room could be reserved for the surrounding community that can be accessed by the artists as well as people from the neighborhood. This space, however, should be self-regulated by the community, allowing people to fill in the space as they deem fit and to organize it effectively to the communities' needs. This analysis mainly occurred from the institution's perspective and for further research, I would suggest creating such a community-run space within a *broedplaats* or an art institute and to observe the developments of such a space.

In the cases I studied, institutions appoint or hire people to maintain and regulate the space according to their requirements. In peripheral neighborhoods where the artistic institutions are the newcomers, bringing their culture with them without allowing a platform for the already present creativity means that the processes of gentrification are not only hastened but, it is also contributing to a patronizing power dynamic. Giving authority to communities and allowing space for self-regulated programs could give insight into what matters and what is urgent for them.⁷¹

As an artist who fears the loss of free spaces in Amsterdam, it is a very appealing thought that the municipality wants to reserve areas as designated free spaces, but as the artists remind us when working with participants from the community: the outcome is never what you expect it to be. It is important that the city take back control over the public space before every plot of land gets swept away by this neoliberal wave, but while doing so stepping back and

⁷¹ I would like to note that community centers in the area already make spaces available for the needs and wishes of local residents, but if arts institutes want to be open buildings and welcoming to their surrounding community then it could be beneficial to imitate these structures and perhaps distinguish themselves from community centers through a greater focus on the production of art.

trusting that the public will make use of the space as they see fit. If the spaces are too predetermined by policy, what will remain is a collection of artificial communities where the only ones pulling the strings are the organizations that established them.

Allowing space for experimentation is a necessity for the vivacity of a city, but to experiment means to test or act for the purpose of discovering something unknown. Spaces reserved for experimentation cannot have preconceived notions about the outcome or they are destined to fail. If we continue to work with systems in which spaces reserved for experimentation are set up temporarily, in locations fleetingly found between occupation, then we are choosing to work with systems not serving potential for creation, nor contributing to the possibility of change, but only allowing prevailing structures to exist.

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