Collaborative challenges: Negotiating the complicities of socially engaged art within an era of neoliberal urbanism

Cecilie Sachs Olsen
University of London, UK

Abstract
This article provides a close and practice-led investigation into the complexities and complicities of politicised collaborative art within an era of neoliberal urbanism. In addressing these complicities from a practice-led perspective, the paper provides a nuanced account of the social functions of art based on critical perspectives relating to issues of urban politics as well as politics of collaboration, participation and representation. Reflecting on experiences with facilitating socially engaged artistic projects in Basel, Monthey and London, I demonstrate the challenges faced when struggling to adhere to the artistic aims of providing transformative experiences, while at the same time working within various neoliberal and institutional constraints and expectations. Rather than succumbing into totalising narratives about how art practices are inevitably instrumentalised as they become part of neoliberal structures, logics and ambitions, the paper emphasises the need to think more carefully about the politics of this practice in terms of how it constantly negotiates and reflects the subtle power relations that exist between artists and their collaborators in urban contexts.

Keywords
Collaboration, urban geography, artistic practice, participation, neoliberal urbanism, urban development, social engagement, community engagement

Introduction
Recent years have seen a proliferation of collaborations between artists and a range of disciplines such as geography, architecture, urban design and environmental science, to mention but a few. This proliferation can be seen in relation to the growing field of multi-disciplinary scholarship and practice focused on questions of space, place and landscape following the so-called spatial turn in the humanities in general and art in particular (see e.g. Hawkins, 2013, 2015; McLaren, 2009). In geography, art practices are valued for involving communities in geographical research (see e.g. Battista et al., 2005;
Butler, 2006; Kanarinka, 2011; Loftus, 2009); for contributing to geography’s orientation towards embodied and practice-based doings (see e.g. de Silvey, 2007; Driver et al., 2002; Hawkins, 2015; McLaren, 2009); and for bringing together scientific and artistic perspectives on matters of public interest (see e.g. Yusoff and Gabrys, 2011). What is particularly relevant with these forms of collaborations in relation to the practice-led work that I will discuss in this paper, is how mobilising art practices in geographical investigations might enable self-conscious forms of place-based intervention. In this paper, I will here specifically focus on community based collaborations in which art practices are mobilised to provide transformative insights regarding personal and collaborative engagements with urban space. I believe that this form of engagement is central for opposing the technocratic vision of the city as a product of experts. It is a well-rehearsed critique of technocratic visions that they tend to portray the city as an organisation of ‘fixed’ objects that are detached from social practices. As the urban critic Raymond Ledrut emphasises (cited in Deutsche, 1996: 52), the moment the city is severed from its social production and seen as an objective and physical entity, it appears to exercise control over the very people who control and use it. Based on practice-led research with my artist collective, zURBS, this paper centres around socially engaged artistic practice aiming to make explicit how the city should rather be seen as an environment formed through various, often conflicting, social practices produced by diverse social groups.

The term ‘socially engaged artistic practice’ here points to a form of collaborative art in which the artwork is a project that is co-produced between artists and participants. Often, the aim is to generate change by intervening in social relations. For zURBS, this change relates to challenging what is presented to us as given (see e.g. Ranciere 1999) by enabling participants to identify, and positively and creatively mediate, power imbalances attached to imaginary and material aspects of urban space. As this paper illustrates, working with this form of collaborative art within an era of neoliberal urbanism is ridden with complicities. In addressing these complicities from a practice-led perspective, the paper provides compelling insights into the social functions of art based on critical perspectives relating to issues of urban politics as well as politics of collaboration, participation and representation. As Hawkins (2013) points out, to locate socially engaged art as a potential field of political action makes urgent a close investigation of these works and the dynamics of their entanglements with their social and material sites. This paper offers such an investigation through a detailed ethnographic account of the awkwardness and power dynamics of engaging in community based collaborations. Through its practice-led approach, the paper makes an important contribution to accounts of geography-art collaborations as it delves into the everyday tensions and possibilities that accompany these practices from the perspective of the practitioner.

zURBS was formed in 2011 by Sabeth Tödtli, Sander van Parijs and myself. The three of us met during an MA programme in urbanism, during which we encountered various urban collectives, social movements, activists, festival organisers and community groups that worked with different forms of artistic urban interventions in order to open up the city as an inspiration for people to create alternative urban futures. We defined zURBS as a socially engaged artistic practice that would focus on dynamic processes that use strategies for participatory urban enquiry and action that is grounded in the arts. ‘The arts’ and ‘the artistic’ are here committed to what Herbert Marcuse defines as ‘an emancipation of sensibility, imagination, and reason in all spheres of subjectivity and objectivity’ (1978: 9). As such, ‘art’ is understood as ‘a site where “new multi-dimensional knowledge and identities are constantly in the process of being formed”’ (Rogoff, 2000, cited in Hawkins, 2011: 465). Hence, aesthetic experience offers ‘the ability [...] to transform our perceptions
of difference and to open space for forms of knowledge that challenge cognitive, social, or political conventions’ (Kester, 2011: 11). The artistic framework of zURBS’ work can here be seen as a method for exploring and fostering a form of transformative experience that has the potential to move beyond the limits of the present. Art proves helpful in enabling this form of experience as it ‘is committed to that perception of the world which alienates individuals from their functional existence and performance in society’ (Marcuse, 1978: 9). This break with everyday habits and routines may have the result that, as Jenny Cameron and Katherine Gibson point out, ‘[n]ew forms of subjectivity may emerge through unexpected shifts in the visceral and affective registers that free embodied practices from their usual sedimented patterns, creating opportunities to act on other possibilities for being’ (2005: 320).

This artistic framework would differ from project to project. Sometimes the participants were invited to become researchers of invisibilities and imaginations. They were sent out in the city on a treasure hunt to find invisibilities and document them in an alternative city archive. Other times zURBS was giving guided (de)tours of imaginary landscapes that encouraged the participants to imagine their surroundings differently. Or, at other occasions, zURBS would facilitate the making of time capsules to give the future an idea about the present, or the making of utopian city models that expressed the dreams and desires of the participants.

Within these imaginative frameworks, the participants are active as interpreters, appropriating the story of the city for themselves and making their own story out of it. Hence, zURBS is based on a belief in the empowering creativity of collective action and shared ideas. In line with Dawkins and Loftus (2013: 674), I will argue that the questions posed by this form of artistic practice is ‘not utilitarian – “what can this action do for our city?”’ – but processual – “how can we use what is all around us to encourage conditions of possibility?”’ (Dawkins and Loftus, 2013: 674). The collaboration between artists and their non-artists collaborators is central here, in the sense that it holds the promise that everyone is capable of imagining these conditions of possibility. Hence, the ability to produce alternatives to present conditions relies on the particular settings for collaboration and participation that are made available in socially engaged artistic practice.

In this paper, these settings for participation and collaboration will be scrutinised in relation to the three projects stadtARCHIV, Montopia and St. Clement’s Utopolis that zURBS has conducted in Basel, Monthey and London in 2014 and 15. Each project provides a personal insight into challenges that zURBS has faced in relation to issues of collaboration and participation, and the challenge of becoming entangled within neoliberal structures, logics and ambitions. With the project stadtARCHIV in Basel, zURBS moved out of the exclusive space of the cultural institution and into the street in order to create an open space that was not polluted by the ‘logic of the institution’. However, our quest for ‘openness’ led us to focus on harmonious reconciliation and ‘togetherness’ – an approach that risked stereotyping the participants as it did not sufficiently engage with their views and perspectives. The series of workshops we conducted as part of the project Montopia in Monthey was oriented around highly structured formats of collaboration that would ensure that the participants would engage with each other’s views and opinions on a one-to-one basis. However, these formats ignored the potential for antagonistic encounters based on everyday prejudices relating to the participants’ pre-defined social situations and identities in the city. The St. Clement’s Utopolis project in London sought to avoid such antagonistic encounters by concentrating on the ethical, rather than artistic, framework of the workshops. However, as this approach got caught up in the constraints and demands of the stakeholders involved the urban development scheme the project was part of, it failed to provide the participants with a transformative experience that would allow for
new subjectivities to emerge and discoveries to be made by expanding the participants’
capacity to act, engage and connect.

My research on and with the above-mentioned projects was guided by methodological
approaches particularly suited to three aspects of zURBS’ practice: the co-creation of,
the interaction within and the reflection on our workshops. Participatory action research
(PAR) helped me rethink the settings of public participation in terms of the co-creation
of zURBS’ practice by various participants and co-organising institutions. An
ethnographic approach focusing on participant observation allowed me to analyse the
interactions between the co-producers of our practice such as the relations between the
zURBS team and the participants and the locations in which the workshops took place,
as well as within zURBS, and between zURBS and the organisers and institutions
involved in facilitating the workshops. Finally, semi-structured interviews and more
informal post-workshop conversations provided access to reflections and layers of
experience that were not necessarily expressed by the participants in the workshops as
such.

**Collaborative art and neoliberal urbanism – A complicated
relationship**

The complicated relationship between collaborative and public art and the field neoliberal
urbanism is well-rehearsed in literature. While art is valued for involving communities in
development processes (see e.g. van Herzele and van Woerkum, 2008), this use of art is also
criticised for integrating local values and expertise in urban projects as part of various ‘creative
city’ initiatives to catalyse investment to cities and neighbourhoods (see e.g. McLean, 2016;
Peck, 2005). Deutsche (1988) observes how the new site-specific art that emerged as part
of urban redevelopment strategies in the 1980s in New York accordingly was co-opted into
technocratic and neoliberal visions aiming to use artistic practice as a tool to enhance an
understanding of public space as an organic unity, and thus denying the legitimacy of spatial
contests. Accordingly, she argues, art became instrumentalised through collaboration with
dominant forces, and thus lost its potential for political intervention. Instead of making the
social organisation and ideological operations of a space visible, this form of public art aimed ‘to
present as natural the conditions of the late-capitalist city into which it hopes to integrate us’
(1996: 66). The focus on collaboration was here oriented around extending idealist conceptions
of art to the surrounding city, rather than for example exploring the mechanisms by which
power relations are perpetuated in the material environment. The consistent invocation of
collaboration endowed art with ‘an aura of social accountability’ (Deutsche, 1996: 67).
Utility and social function thus became the principle yardstick for measuring the value of
public art. In more contemporary debates, art critic Claire Bishop (2012: 12) points to how
collaboration is seen as a sign of social responsibility due to its critical distance from the
individualism of the neoliberal world order. Artistic practice that makes references to
collaboration, participation, community and collectivity is seen to work against dominant
market imperatives by channelling art’s symbolic capital into constructive social change
rather than supplying the market with commodities. The urgency of this social task has, as
Bishop points out, led to a focus on the accountability of art in relation to what it can do for
society. Answers to this question include ‘increasing employability, minimising crime, fostering
aspiration – anything but artistic experimentation and research as values in and of themselves’
(Bishop, 2012: 13). Accordingly, many artists voice a lack of concern with private self-expression
and thereby express their opposition to the autonomy and privilege of art in favour of its social
responsibility. However, while focusing on fostering social change by opposing neoliberal
structures, this form of art may, nevertheless, be complicit with these structures. By addressing this paradox, the practice-led discussion on community-based art collaborations in this paper provides a nuanced account that warns against reducing these kinds of collaborations to any simplistic principle. From the practitioner’s point of view, then, it is important to acknowledge that the boundaries between artistic autonomy, social responsibility and instrumentalized art are not clear cut, and that creating any form of binary between them is unproductive. There is, for example, a tendency for writers and critics to create a binary between art that is autonomous and thus perceived as being inherently critical, and art that is instrumentalized and thus perceived as being co-opted and inherently uncritical. As the Dutch socially engaged artist, Jeanne van Heeswijk puts it: ‘Why do we have to talk again about this binary position when, in my opinion, autonomy and instrumentalization are no longer oppositional strategies?’ (Heeswijk, 2012: 78). According to Heeswijk, this binary presumes ‘that working together with different partners such as local governments, councils, or social housing organizations invariably means that the artist is going to be instrumentalized’ (Heeswijk, 2012). As a reply to this presumption she states: ‘I like being an instrument that works on self-organization, collective ownership, and new forms of sociability. I like being an instrument that enables all of us to occupy the place in which we live’ (Heeswijk, 2012). Nevertheless, more theoretical debates on socially engaged art risk getting stuck in the binary opposition between social commitment and artistic autonomy. This is particularly well illustrated in the polarised discussion regarding politicised collaborative art between art critics Grant Kester and Claire Bishop. Bishop (2006) argues that the perceived ethical responsibility of collaborative art compromises the artistic significance of these projects and their potentials for disruption, discomfort, shock, doubt or sheer pleasure. For Bishop, disruption is particularly important in order to question the coherence of the city and expose social conflict. Hence, in her view, art should focus on antagonism, conflict and disturbance as crucial elements of artistic experience.

Bishop’s view is contested by Kester (2004) who emphasises that the role of the artist in socially engaged work is to facilitate an ethical process where material and social conflicts and differentials (of power, resources and authority) are side lined in favour of consensual dialogue that depends on a given equality of voices. He accuses Bishop for advocating inward-looking elitist art that attempts to maintain cultural authority and artistic autonomy through its antagonistic approach. Accordingly, he argues that the role of the artist in socially engaged work is fraught with the risk of calling for democracy from a structure of social relations that enacts inequality. Bishop (2006) equates Kester’s moral concerns with the demand by neo-liberal governments for the arts to be socially inclusive (e.g. compulsory participation in a consumer society), privileging participatory art as a way to provide homeopathic solutions to problems that are systemic. She points to how the focus on social participation is viewed positively because it creates submissive citizens who respect authority and accept the ‘risk’ and responsibility of looking after themselves in the face of diminished public services. Thus, participation within this context will not change or even raise consciousness of the structural conditions of people’s daily existence; it will only help people to accept them. Equalling collaboration with social commitment, then, is, according to Bishop, problematic because it may lead to a situation where collaboration is celebrated as inherently ‘revolutionary’ and ‘resisting’ with little critical attention given to the meaning of this collaboration and its production. While Bishop and Kester accuse each other of placing in jeopardy the political power of art, they do agree on the importance of exploring the types of relations that exist in socially engaged artistic practice. This calls for a close investigation of the types of collaboration produced within this form of art. The following case studies offer such a close investigation.
stadtARCHIV: The invited space and the logic of the institution

stadtARCHIV (cityARCHIVE), was a project commissioned to be part of the performaCITY festival (June 2014) organised by the theatre Kaserne Basel. The festival was oriented around ‘the issue of “City and Art”’ (Trans4mator, 2014) and featured performances and installations by well-known artists such as Dries Verhoeven, LIGNA, Ant Hampton, Tim Etchells and Gob Squad. Whereas these artists presented internationally renowned work that targeted a national and international performance audience, zURBS was cast as what we, within zURBS, call a ‘participatory alibi’ that would ensure ‘local anchorage’ and participation. We were to engage various local community groups in a series of workshops in which the participants were sent into the city to collect found objects and artefacts and make drawings, take photographs, record sound clips, scribble stories and sample smell in laboratory glasses that would represent their experiences of the city. The material would be brought to the theatre, where it would be archived in ‘an alternative city archive’ that comprised the theatre lobby (Figure 1). The alternative city archive, then, would (re)present lived experiences of Basel by letting the residents decide what aspects of the city should be archived.

The stadtARCHIV was claimed to provide an ‘authenticating frame’ (Bell and Beswick, 2014) that would offer the festivalgoers, of whom many came from abroad or from other cities, a direct insight into what the residents of Basel thought about their city. This authenticating frame tends to conflate authenticity with inclusion. As Nancy Thumim (2012) points out, contemporary art institutions need participating publics in order to establish and maintain their legitimacy as public institutions. Similarly, performaCITY needed the inhabitants of Basel to participate in the festival, in order to legitimate itself as a public festival for the ‘ordinary’ people of Basel in addition to the national and international festival crowd. Accordingly, zURBS was encouraged to recruit participants who would not normally attend the festival.

The same day that zURBS arrived in Basel, a big demonstration was scheduled to take place in the city centre. The demonstration was arranged by the autonomous scene in Basel in support of the Swiss squatter collective, Wagenplatz, who was to be evicted by the police the same day. Since May 2013, Wagenplatz had occupied a big vacant lot by the harbour. A cultural redevelopment had long been planned on the site, but it was only when the company Shift Mode won the bid to develop the site and decided to place a car park where Wagenplatz was set up, that the police and city government finally got the

Figure 1. The display of the alternative city archive, Basel, 2014 (photo by zURBS).
opportunity to remove significant parts of the squatter community. During the eviction, the police acted overly aggressively towards the peaceful squatters, arresting 36 people. The zURBS team decided to invite the squatters to become part of stadtARCHIV by archiving remnants of the site in the alternative city archive and this way give them the opportunity to represent their cause and even winning over supporters through our project. However, the squatters promptly declined our offer. Now, why did they decline?

Given the attention Wagenplatz had received due to the eviction and demonstration, the squatting collective had become a charged political phenomenon. By occupying the vacant lot in the harbour, Wagenplatz was already getting on with the work of representing itself. Carlos Frade (2011, cited in Purcell, 2014: 152) calls this a politics of ‘presentation’; people gathering to physically present themselves to the city government, as exemplified by the actions of ‘the indignados’ in Spain and the Occupy movement. This presentation demonstrates in physical space the gap between city representatives and those who are represented. While the City of Basel argued that it was acting in the best interest of the city, the Wagenplatz supporters insisted that they are the city, as much as any other residents. In this vacant space on the margins of the city, the collective had thus created a so-called ‘site of radical possibility’ (hooks, 1989) from which they were able to define themselves in opposition to the conformity and hierarchical authority structures of landlords and the city government. The question, then, was, what would happen to this political statement if it became part of an arts festival and was thus perceived as art?

The ‘logic of the institution’ is relevant here. Even though zURBS aimed at suspending this logic by creating an open space for the articulation of various identities and differences, stadtARCHIV was hosted by a state-sponsored cultural institution that produces art. This context bounded the possibilities for agency as well as inclusion for Wagenplatz because the only subject position available here was that of an artwork. Accordingly, the collective risked being represented as a somewhat static (and lost) movement on display – a cultivated pictorial and poetic symbol of the protest rather than as a political criticism. Hence, by aiming to provide Wagenplatz with the possibility of using stadtARCHIV as their instrument for advertising their cause and potentially even winning over supporters, we forgot that this instrument, the art institution, has its own set of rules that opposed the squatting collective’s goals. Claims to a so-called ‘untainted’ collaboration free of formal hierarchies and institutionalised structures are here challenged. The ‘invited space’ that we wanted Wagenplatz to participate in, would intimately affect Wagenplatz’ ability to enter and exercise its voice on the collective’s own terms. The political field that Wagenplatz was part of hence defined the limits of how they could be represented in terms of the subject-object links that could be made in the given context. Hence, it does not matter how equitable the intentions that inform the creation of an arena for participation and collaboration might be. Among people who enter a particular arena, their existing relationships to that arena will still influence their engagement with it. There is a stark contrast between spaces that are chosen, fashioned and claimed by those at the margins, and spaces into which those who are considered marginal are invited.

**Working outside institutions**

Acknowledging the structural constraints of the ‘invited space’ of, in this case, the art institution, the zURBS team decided to create a mobile city archive from a post-card holder on wheels that we could bring into the city streets and engage with people in situ (Figure 2). This approach resonates with the aim of socially engaged artistic practice to work within various public urban context in order to engage a broader audience than would visit a
theatre or museum, and thus articulate and make visible perspectives that had they been located in art institutions, might not have appeared at all. In line with Kester, we were wary of addressing exclusively those inside the enchanted circle of art and therefore re-enforcing a structural inequality because of its refusal to sufficiently engage with a non-art public. To Kester (2004), a collaborative artwork should be a cumulative process of exchange and dialogue with the community within which the work will be produced. Accordingly, we wanted to create a process in which personal perspectives could be expressed on the initiative and terms of the participants. For example, at the square where we made our first stop with ‘the mobile stadtARCHIV’, we were approached by a middle-aged woman (Figure 3). She was curious about the installation, and seemed very interested to talk. We told her about the archive and asked her if she wanted to share what Basel is to her. She immediately replied: ‘Shit (scheiße), to me, Basel is shit’. We asked her why that is, and told her to write it down on the paper we had given her. She happily wrote on the paper: ‘Basel is shit because of all the immigrants come and take my work. And after they arrived to the city, it is full of dirt.’ In our attempt to accommodate marginalised or less socially accepted voices like this one, we failed to engage critically with the statement in ways that would attest to its relevance as a valid perspective on Basel. We were so occupied with making the woman

Figure 2. Taking the alternative city archive into the streets, Basel, 2014 (photo by zURBS).
who made this racist remark feel good about voicing her perspective, and in this way, confirm the openness of stadtARCHIV, that we did not sufficiently question the experience, arguments, and ideas used to justify her view. As a result, the remark was not given any further explanation, for example in terms of concrete examples from the woman’s personal experience of Basel. Hence the remark could easily be written off as a simple-minded racism that has little or no relevance for the city as such.

Bishop’s antagonistic approach could have provided more polemical grounds for dealing with this kind of statement. Rather than achieving a harmonious reconciliation focusing on an uncritical ‘togetherness’, this approach could have sustained a tension between our different positions and thus made explicit what is repressed in sustaining the semblance of social harmony. By avoiding this tension, the zURBS team undermined the statement as a banal perspective, rather than validating it by engaging with it on its own terms. In this context, then, Kester’s dialogical aesthetic can be criticised for falling short of addressing the political aspect of communication. This political aspect relies on recognising a model of subjectivity that is not harmonious but divided into partial identifications open to constant flux: ‘the presence of what is not me renders my identity precarious and vulnerable, and the threat that the other represents transforms my own sense of self into something questionable’ (Bishop, 2006: 66).

By seeking to sustain social harmony rather than disrupting it, we repeatedly failed to engage substantially with the various perspectives on Basel that we were presented with in the stadtARCHIV project. We did not ask the man eating lunch in the park why ‘rain, simply rain’ was his immediate description of Basel, or the man waiting for the tram why he insisted that Basel was no different from any other city, or why the function of the river to gather all inhabitants on the same side of it was so important for the architects. As a result, the intervention seemed only to reflect certain unnuanced ideas about Basel rather than
challenging them. Acknowledging that we needed more time to properly develop a concept that
would enable us to engage with passers-by in ways that did not override critical perspectives, and
which at the same time acknowledged the tension between our artistic framework and the non-
art public, we asked ourselves: How could we promote an awareness of difference in and
through our work, and at the same time build commonalities among the participants? How
could we acknowledge tensions between different views, and still facilitate an openness where
everyone would be encouraged to have their say?

Montopia: Collaborative inventions and antagonistic encounters

In Monthey, a city of approximately 17,000 inhabitants located in the Swiss Alps, zURBS
carried out the project Montopia (September 2014). Over the course of one week politicians,
school children, elderly, unemployed, young professionals, parents and students took part in
workshops where they collectively created a model of Montopia – the Monthey of their
dreams and desires (Figure 4).

Montopia was built out of objects that the participants had found in the city: a fountain made
out of a snail shell and a green glass bottle, a beer-can tree, a climbing gym made out of a

Figure 4. The exhibition of the Montopia model, Monthey, 2014 (photo by zURBS).
mushroom, and so on. The process of constructing these contributions to Montopia (whether in
the form of a physical place, building, means of transport, atmosphere or the like) was facilitated
as a form of speed-dating: two and two participants would sit opposite each other with two
collected objects in between them. They would carry out a ‘task’ relating to the objects. These
tasks would for example start with having the participants tell and write down memories they
have from Monthey, which relate to the object, or for example finding five characteristics/
qualities the objects have in common. It would then develop into building something with the
two objects, that they would like to have in Montopia. Between each ‘task’, the participants
would move one seat to the right, whereas the objects stayed put. This meant that for each task
the participants would have to collaborate with a new person and a new object, taking into
considerations the previous tasks relating to these objects, as documented by the other
participants. Through this process, the participants obtained a shared ownership over all
the constructions that eventually took shape, as one of the participants pointed out:

[T]here is nothing you do on your own, everything is mixed up, there is no individual. So you can
find a bit of yourself in everything that is created. It is part of yourself but it is not yourself
because you created it together with the others. (Maud, 40s, theatre administrator, personal
interview)

After the workshops, zURBS would go to all the places where the models had been placed
on the map, take a picture of the place and then Photoshop the model into the actual place
where the residents had placed it. This way, a plausible reality was created out of people’s
dreams and imaginations.

However, the risk with the fantastic buildings and stories of Montopia invented by the
participants was that they could easily be cast off as mere exaggerations that had nothing to
do with ‘reality’. In one workshop, where the majority of the participants were employees at
the local theatre, a central figure of the planning department in Monthey, Philippe, showed
up. It was clear that Philippe created a dichotomy between the workshop and ‘reality’:

[R]eality is not to have –how do you say that: noisette? – a nut is not speaking with the flower
and that is not concrete for me […] My second job is director of the bank here, and I am always
on something really, really real. […] For me [the workshop] is a little bit too much utopia. For
me. Because I am so, I need to touch something, I cannot do with virtual things […] that is my
character. […] It is so special… I can’t have the vision of the castle made out of an egg carton or
something like this, it is not possible for me.

This perspective places the loci of authority in domains such as the bank – a place that deals with
the ‘real’ world. To uphold this perspective, it is necessary that fantasy, exaggeration and
fictiveness are socially placed within the domains of anti- and non-authority: the childish, for
example (Stewart, 1993). In creating this dichotomy between art and reality, Philippe resorted to
the technocratic approach that resorts to arguments outside argumentation – a city is a city –
and so decreed in advance which approaches to urban space are legitimate. Accordingly, instead
of taking part in the collaborative process of making Montopia, Philippe took on the role as an
observer. As he explained (personal interview 04.09.2014), he saw the workshop as a useful tool
for tapping into local knowledge through the transmission of information from members of the
public to him as an urban planner:

For me, it is really important to speak with everybody about everybody. And [the workshop] was
a good exercise for that. […] It is good politics because you do not need a result on this exercise.
And if you want a result, what we have to do is: if I have an idea I have to speak with people to
get them on my idea, and take the people with you. Here is another job: everybody gives an idea
and you can hear without problem every idea, you do not have to make a decision: it is this place or this place, it is really free. But real politics is not that, it will be a lot more difficult than that. But it was interesting to talk with people that you do not know and they are voicing their opinions about places, castles, city – that was good.

For Philippe, the workshop provided detailed listening and enrichment. He clearly appreciated the public expressions of desires for Monthey, but at the same time he left these desires in place by regarding them as separate from any ‘true’ political situation in which he would have to act upon them. Accordingly, he approached the workshops as a free and open space detached from the contested realities of urban planning. The problem with this approach is that it reduces the concept of difference to the idea of a multiplicity of uniqueness, indicating simply the acknowledgment of the existence of diverse particularities in society. Laclau and Mouffe call this conception ‘a closed system of differences’ (2001: 115). Instead of seeing difference as a complex relational process in which one’s subjectivity is transformed through continual identification and alienation, it is here understood as a series of distinct categories that can sometimes be held together by a broader unifying ideal. For example, Philippe was making a clear distinction between himself and the rest of the participants of the workshop: ‘If you have a group like me, just like me – really pragmatic – you can’t [do the same workshop] as when you are working with people that have jobs such as [Marco], people working at the theatre.’ As a result of this a priori constitution of the other participants as theatre people that deal with fiction and imagination on a daily basis, Philippe established a direct link between the participants’ identity and the fantastic buildings made in the workshop. This link was based on pre-existing judgements that were not only expressed by Philippe. The other participants in the workshop immediately recognised and commented upon Philippe’s ‘outsider’ role:

Maud: He didn’t play. Did you notice that? [...] He wanted to observe from the outside. He didn’t want to get involved, you know?
Michaela: Yes, it was like we were kids and he was the father looking at the kids playing. I felt a little bit like that...

The authority of the ‘real’ urban planning over the imaginative play of the workshop, was here enforced. By taking the role of ‘the observer’, Philippe – as representative of the ‘real’ urban planning – occupied the most essential relationship of authority, that between the adult and the kid. Philippe’s apparent lack of engagement here served to re-enforce prejudice towards unreasonable, unthinking ‘authorities’ that form judgments and orders in apparent detachment from the lives of the people they govern:

[I]t is interesting for me how some people, like [Philippe]... I mean they are technical and they can’t see how this kind of project is not just fantasy, they are like: ‘Ah artists –they are crazy! We are wasting our time.’ It is frightening to see how he cannot play. But play is useful. I really think it is very...to see how you can connect reality and fiction, and how fiction can nourish reality. Of course it does, for me it is obvious, but it is really astonishing that for some people working with the city – I mean because he is working with that [...] wow... it is questioning... (Maud, 40s, theatre administrator, personal interview)

Similar prejudices were expressed in other workshop contexts. In one workshop, I noticed how a middle-aged woman repeatedly ignored the inputs from an older woman in the speed-dating process. The two of them were working with a model of a public park that was created from a music stand and a red umbrella. The exercise was to imagine the place as a nightmare. The middle-aged woman immediately responded that if a basketball court were
placed right next to the park it would certainly be a nightmare as the noise would be unbearable. The older woman tried to suggest that garbage in and around the park would also be a nightmare, but the middle-aged woman kept insisting on the terrible noise from basketball courts. After the workshop had ended the middle-aged woman approached me and explained the dynamics between her and the older woman. Apparently, the latter was a former local politician, and the middle-aged woman told me that she had had a fierce dispute with the politicians in the city regarding a basketball court right outside her house.

As these examples illustrate, the workshops produced antagonistic encounters between the participants. The productiveness of this antagonism, as advocated by Bishop, is questionable in this context. Instead of leading the participants to question and challenge fixed identities, the encounters rather served as a way of insisting on the rigidity of social roles and thus re-enforcing the antagonistic camps of ‘us and them’. Equally, the workshops failed to facilitate an open dialogue, as envisioned by Kester (1999), as the pre-existing conflict of perspectives impeded a consensual understanding. Is it possible, then, to imagine a framework that would retain the power to challenge fixed or conventional meanings and identities through a dialogue that works across the ‘us and them’ binary?

**St. Clement’s Utopolis: A crisis of identity – Art or social work?**

*St. Clement’s Utopolis* (June 2015) was commissioned as a so-called ‘public art project’ that was to be part of the redevelopment of the St. Clement’s Hospital site on Mile End Road in London. The former mental hospital was being turned into a residential complex of 252 dwellings, and the developers were looking for local resources to ‘sort out’ the public art and community requirements of the project. This ‘sorting out’ made it sound as if zURBS would again be cast as a ‘participatory alibi’ to meet the demands of governments and funding organisations for urban development schemes to be socially and locally inclusive. Yet, in spite of this somewhat problematic framework of the project, we were not blind to the possibility that our scepticism about and resistance towards this type of public art project were better enabled by participation in the system rather than an escape from it, as argued by Joseph (2002).

However, *St. Clement’s Utopolis* led zURBS into an identity crisis that threatened to dissolve our whole practice and collective. By entering what Bishop (2006) calls ‘the slew of community-based practices’ the fine line between social work and artistic practice became so blurred that we lost track of the conceptual density and artistic significance of our project in favour of keeping a good relationship with our collaborators. Through our previous work, zURBS had carefully elaborated a set of methods, frames of reference, stylistic characteristics and attitudes towards social and aesthetic issues. This distinctive voice and outlook was put to the test in each of our projects, over and over, because it had to be related to the specific context of each project. In some cases, we chose to complicate our position as authors, or share it with others, but that choice was made by us as authors with a clear motivation and autonomy. In *St. Clement’s Utopolis*, this clear motivation and autonomy were deeply challenged. More than ever, we felt caught between a generalised set of ethical precepts and the artistic specificity of our practice.

The developers of the St. Clement’s project had clear ideas of which local institutions to involve in zURBS’ artistic project. It was important to them to engage so-called marginalised groups such as residents from the Bangladeshi community and home providing accommodation facilities and welfare services for active and retired seafarers, ex-army and ex-service personnel and homeless adults (LAWFS) (Figure 5). zURBS made it clear that the wide spectrum of participants that we envisioned included not only
marginalised groups, but all kinds of resident groups. We did not want to stigmatise certain
groups as being in particular need for our projects, but rather to build up a relationship with
our participants based on a mutual interest in exploring the local neighbourhood. However,
in the ‘matchmaking mediation’ (Kwon, 2004) undertaken by the developers, it became clear
that their motivation was based on a presumption of zURBS’ interest in working with
marginalised groups and the anticipation of a particular kind of collaborative project.
The problem with these presumptions was that they reduced, and maybe even
stereotyped, the identity of zURBS and the community groups. The ‘community’ here
became a synonym for the social groups of the marginal or underprivileged classes. Four
workshops were accordingly arranged with residents of a sheltered housing for elderly,
residents from LAFWS, ‘learners’ from a centre providing drop-in activities for
immigrant women and finally school children from the local elementary school.

Kwon (2004) points to how certain types of community groups are often favoured for
artistic partnerships because of the easy correspondence between their identity and particular
social issues. Involving, for example, the homeless residents of LAFWS would fuel
the branding of the housing project as socially inclusive. The ‘easy’ correspondence between
the identity of the LAFWS as marginalised and the social concern with ‘inclusion’ is here put to
the fore. This is problematic as it represents the primary division in society as one between an
included majority and an excluded minority. The goal of the public art project is here simply to
provide a transition across the boundary from excluded to included, to allow people to engage
with the St. Clement’s site – even if they did not have a direct relation to the site as such. As
one of the residents of LAFWS replied when I asked if he would take part in the workshop:
‘What’s in it for me? It’s not like the housing that is going to be built at St. Clement’s
will be available to me’. Kwon sets up the following equation for this form of community-
Here, the identity of a community group serves as the thematic content of the artwork, representing this or that social issue, as well as the community itself, in an isolated and reified way.

As a public art project zURBS’ task was accordingly to perform some form of social work in terms of facilitating a transaction between these vulnerable community groups and the St. Clement’s site. This transaction had the perspective of problem solving in terms of a reversal of hierarchies (e.g. giving voice to the underprivileged), and simultaneously providing a certain compensation for them (Riet et al., 2012). This became clear in an email conversation where the consultant commissioner of the project and I discussed a PR text for disseminating information about the project to potential participants. Following zURBS’ aim of having the participants question, rather than blindly accept or come to terms with, the developments happening in their local area, I proposed a text that emphasised the aim of letting the participants articulate their desires and wishes for their neighbourhood through all possible imaginary projections for the St. Clement’s site. However, it was kindly suggested we should change the conceptual framework of the workshops:

I wonder whether we should introduce the workshops more along these lines: ‘In the context of the redevelopment of St Clement’s hospital site, we are inviting you to participate in helping us to design some public art for the development...’? Many of the people we will be approaching have already been involved in community design workshops, which helped the architects to refine how the plans for the site were developed. We don’t want to give the impression that we are repeating that exercise. (personal email 09.03.2015)

This reconceptualisation of the workshops put zURBS in an awkward position. We had to accept that we could not do an exercise that would be perceived as similar to the community design workshop when the construction was already well underway. This would completely undermine the initial efforts at public engagement. At the same time, it was unclear to us how these workshops had taken place – whether we were talking about completed proposals being represented for ‘feedback’ in which the only agency left to the public was the simple act of registering its approval or disapproval. Furthermore, we risked replicating this latter approach by offering a site for simply ‘incorporating’ community groups into the development rather than providing them with an opportunity to question or challenge it. How to find a middle-way that did not undermine the previous attempts at public engagement, but at the same time opened up a space for critique?

The framework of letting the participants design their own proposals for the public artwork for the St. Clement’s site seemed like a potential for critique in this regard. We encouraged the participants to make models of public artworks from various objects and artefacts that they would collect from the streets during an explorative walk around the area. The artworks were to be seen as monuments to their personal relationships with the place. We emphasised that even though the physical infrastructure of places changes, people’s memories of and associations with these places remain. This perspective was an attempt to create a shared sense of ownership among the participants, and to point to possibilities for appropriating space in spite of major structural transformations.

Working within institutional constraints and demands

zURBS ideological aims were somehow contradicted by the fact that we were collaborating with the developers of St. Clement’s and thus could easily be seen to represent the interests of the developers in terms of ‘selling’ the project rather than critically scrutinising it. In this regard, the workshops could be critiqued for offering quite passive and static roles for
participants, defined by the need for inclusion rather than the achievement of specific purposes or goals. For example, zURBS was faced with a number of demands, relating to ethical and practical considerations, from the institutional administrators responsible for the community groups that we were working with. When trying to navigate in this complex web of demands, motivations, expectations and projections, we increasingly felt that we had to prescribe the nature of the groups’ participation in advance of the workshops. The older people would be more than happy to share their memories of London, we were told by the administrator of the home. Hence, we should focus on letting individuals tell their personal stories in the workshops. The collecting of objects in the city should be skipped as the older participants wouldn’t ‘have the ability or inclination to do that’. The ‘learners’ of the women’s centre were very insecure about the English language and also in terms of interacting with strangers, the administrator told us. Hence, we should start the workshop with an informal get-to-know-each other chat in order to create a familiar and safe frame around the workshop activities, rather than guiding them into the city blindfolded as we proposed. The administrator of the LAWFS home advised us to accompany the participants on their hunt for objects as they most likely would be too disengaged to carry out that, or any other task, on their own.

We did our best to tailor each workshop to these specifications and considerations. However, in determining the nature of the collaborative relationship between the participants and ourselves, we overlooked the discursive constructions of our participants’ identities. We fell in the trap that Kwon (2004) warns against, and considered the objectives and identities of the different participant groups as determined before any encounter with outside individuals or groups like zURBS. Kwon points to how this form of ‘essentializing process’ enforces the idea of community as a unified and existing social relation defined through the isolation of a single point of commonality and a presumption of unified subjects. The identity that is created through the art project, then, is viewed as a self-affirming, self-validating ‘expression’ of a unified community neglecting the representative frameworks that direct such productions of identity. Accordingly, rather than focusing on how the workshops could help engender different types of identities, we focused on the self-expression of the pre-conceived identities of the participants: the elderly were encouraged to share their memories and experiences from the past, recounting stories about how they experienced East-London during the war or about how they arrived in London as young adults in search for better lives; the school children were asked about the nearby parks and the playgrounds and where they liked to hang out; the women’s group was invited to discuss their children, and the cultural traditions of their home countries; the residents of the LAFWS were accompanied out into the streets where we tried to facilitate discussions revolving around their experiences of the struggle to live and find work in the area.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with the stories stemming from these self-expressions. They are indeed important for giving voice to the underprivileged and clarifying the personal and moral meaning of social issues and events. The problem was the framework through which these stories were told and subsequently represented. The developers had hired a blacksmith to create iron works for the site, using the stories told by the participants in our workshops as inspiration for motifs. These motifs could be critiqued for being stereotyped and simplified: a motif of various religious symbols represented the different cultural traditions talked about within the woman’s group, an old-fashioned bell represented the stories told by the elderly, an anchor represented the residents of the LAFWS and a bicycle represented the school children.

The motifs were exhibited in a public exhibition together with the models made by the participants. The exhibition sought to display a variety of social and cultural differences,
as represented by the different participant groups, but did so at the expense of a critical examination and questioning of these differences. Hence, the question is: when the process of this constant negotiation between different interests, agendas and expectations between institutions, participants and artists is over, who has actually spoken and what was it possible to say?

As mentioned, *St. Clement’s Utopolis* made the zURBS team seriously doubt our approach and artistic integrity. In negotiating with the different project partners we had not only compromised the identities of our workshop participants and pre-determined the nature of their participation, we had also failed to give our participants the form of transformative experiences that were so important to our work. Out of considerations for institutional concerns about the perceived ‘vulnerability’ of the workshop participants we focused on providing a familiar and safe setting that corresponded to a set of ‘considerations’ that was articulated by the institutional administrators. These considerations led us to neglect the aesthetic and performative framework of our workshop by skipping blindfolds, abstract maps and treasure hunts. Instead, we focused on how we could best communicate the project in terms of involvement in the St. Clement’s site and the development of the public artwork, and at the same time how we could demonstrate an awareness of the problems and challenges potentially faced by the participants in this regard. Our ethical concerns were here starting from moral concerns or obligations posed by our institutional collaborators, resulting in us framing the workshops in ways that would comply or conform to pre-established norms and regulations. As a result, the transformative experience of the participants became restricted and weakened. Instead of allowing space for new subjectivities to emerge, the ethical considerations articulated by the institutional administrators defined the limits of the participant’s identities and possible actions in the workshops.

**Conclusion**

As I have illustrated in this paper, community based collaborations in which art practices are mobilised to engage residents with their urban environment are ridden with complicities relating to participative dynamics as well as institutional logics, demands and constraints. The three case studies I have discussed here, offers a close investigation of these complicities and the dynamics of the art practices’ entanglements with their social and material sites. With the *stadtARCHIV* project in Basel, zURBS became aware of the ‘cultural logic of the institution’ when trying to recruit the squatters of Wagenplatz to represent themselves in the archive. Even though we moved the *stadtARCHIV* into the streets in order to escape this logic, it did not change the cultural field that defines the limits of collaboration. While being wary of not alienating passers-by and enforcing a distinction between those who are inside and those who are outside of the art discourse, we focused so much on openness and agreement that we risked stereotyping the participants by not sufficiently engaging with their views and opinions. In the collaborative process of making *Montopia*, we tried to ensure one-to-one engagement with different perspectives and views through the speed-dating process. However, this structure for collaboration did not provide a ‘free’ aesthetic field completely removed from domestic and domesticated modes of sociability. Everyday prejudices relating to the participants’ pre-defined social situations and identities in the city led to antagonistic encounters that reinforced the binary camps of ‘us and them’. As part of the urban development project in London, zURBS had to comply with pre-established norms and regulations from the various institutional collaborators. As a result, we had to reduce the aesthetic framework of the project to an absolute minimum and thus limited the participants’ possible actions in the workshops, and failed to provide them with any
transformative experience that would allow for new subjectivities and discoveries to be made.

All three cases, then, illustrate the collaborative challenges of carrying out socially engaged artistic work within an era of neoliberal urbanism. Through a practice-led analysis that combines critical ideas about the social construction of art with perspectives taken from critical geography such as the power and politics of producing (urban) space, the cases reveal the, often suppressed, contradictions within artistic as well as urban processes. Vanessa Broto observes that the diagnostic mechanism to contradictions is always the same: ‘contradiction points towards an impossibility that needs to be resolved through the annihilation of one of the terms of the contradiction’ (2015: 461). Hence, there is, for example, a tendency for actors seeking social change to attempt to resolve contradiction by countering static opposites: passive residents should be turned into active participants, homogeneous urban space is to be countered with a heterogeneous and liberatory space, alienation is to be exchanged for intimacy and personal engagement, individualisation should be replaced with collectivity and collaboration, and so on. In order for these contradictory forces to cancel each other out (i.e. in order for passive to become active, for homogeneous to become heterogeneous) there is a risk to posit alternatives as a liberatory exteriority to the everyday sphere of production of meaning, knowledge, discourse, and institutions. This liberatory exteriority constitutes the aims of producing collaboration, activation and heterogeneity against an outside (individuality, passivity and homogeneity) that is seen as external and antagonistic to these aims.

However, as Joseph (2002) points out, referencing Butler, oppositional agency is a reiterative or rearticulatory practice that is immanent in power, and not a relation of external opposition to power. In other words, power is productive of subjectivity, not simply repressive or exploitative in relation to individual subjects. Technocratic and neoliberal institutions and practices are, for example, to some extent the outcome of some element of desire or need for these institutions. Hence, Purcell argues that people have the desire to be ruled, ‘to be relieved of the burden of ruling ourselves’ (2014: 93). In the contemporary global North, according to Purcell, the desire to be ruled manifests itself as a taste for the subtle and seductive oligarchy of consumer capitalism turning us into willing subjects of inertia, inactivity and passivity. The project of social change, then, is not so much to confront a power wielded by benevolent forces beyond our control, as it is about reappropriating our own power by reactivating our desire for democracy. Democracy here makes space for political action in which we seek to lay new grounds by extrapolating and amplifying practices and ideas that are already taking place.

Accordingly, as all three case studies have illustrated, socially engaged artistic practice cannot work from some external non-rationalised realm of emergent truth and freedom but only from the constraints of the present. Hence, the potential for socially engaged artistic practice to have full artistic autonomy when working within formal hierarchies and institutional structures of neoliberal urbanism is here somewhat limited. This, however, does not mean that these forms of community based collaborations are entirely instrumentalised and merged with neoliberal logics and thus produces passive subjects with no agency or empowerment. When discussing the role of artistic practices within urban processes, there is a risk of succumbing into totalising narratives about how these practices are merged with neoliberal structures, logics and ambitions. My practice-led account provides an alternative to these totalising narratives by emphasising the need to think more carefully about the politics of this practice in terms of how it constantly
negotiates and reflects the subtle power relations that exist between artists and their collaborators in the context of neoliberal urbanism.

Seen from this perspective, Bishop’s and Kester’s dispute regarding the contradictory nexus of collaborative artworks, where the transformative potential of art directly confronts its institutional character, risks reducing these forms of community based collaborations to a simple question of artistic autonomy vs. social commitment, or aesthetics vs. ethics. As my case studies illustrate, even the most rigorous ethical considerations or carefully guarded artistic autonomy becomes an extension, rather than re-configuration of, existing power structures when socially engaged artistic practice gets stuck in these contradictions and binary oppositions. My practice-led analysis provides a more nuanced approach that opposes false clarity and simplicity to the conflictual, ambivalent inter-subjective space of these forms of collaborations. As such, this paper expands current debates in geography (see e.g. Hawkins, 2015) on what kind of ‘work’ art-geography collaborations with specific focus on community engagement can do with respect to place-based interventions and engagements, as well as the critical relations between these forms of collaborations and neoliberal urbanisms.

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References


**Cecilie Sachs Olsen** is a British Academy Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for the GeoHumanities, Royal Holloway, University of London. Her work is practice-based and revolves around developing creative methods for urban research and exploring how artistic practice can be used as a framework to analyse and re-imagine urban space and politics. Cecilie is initiator and member of the artist collective, zURBS, who works with a participatory approach in which a wide range of participants are invited to be part of performative actions that experiment with different approaches to how we can re-imagine the urban landscape through imaginative and creative processes that question what urban space means and is.