

URBAN CRACKS: INTERSTITIAL SPACES IN THE CITY

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This paper focuses on the research trajectory of visual artist Elly Van Eeghem. Through her practice of video and intervention in public space, she will reflect on the role of artists in re-shaping urban cracks and the influence of these spaces in re-thinking artistic practice.



Fig 1. Oceaniëstraat / recto, 2011, Elly Van Eeghem, video. © Elly Van Eeghem.

pointing out how meaningful (-less) or provocative an act can be.

Fig 2. Oceaniëstraat / verso, 2011, Elly Van Eeghem, text projection. © Elly Van Eeghem.



Fig 3. *Urban Fabric #19*, 2010, Elly Van Eeghem, lomographic print, 90 x 90 cm. © Elly Van Eeghem.

Urban Crack as a Concept and a Case

The growing number of neglected, residual spaces challenges the functioning of our cities. These interstitial spaces fall between the familiar boundaries of urban planning (generally, they cannot be found on official city maps) and are often labeled as wastelands, characterized by an apparent void. The fact that urban cracks are not planned, does not mean that they are empty. They host informal practices such as fishing, squatting, waste dumping, taking the dog out, graffiti, drug use or underground festivals. However, these uses are often oppressed in more delimited urban spaces that are dominated by economic and consumptive logics.

Urban cracks are conceptualized as in-between time spaces in which different logics meet and conflict. Philosopher Dirk van Weelden described these places as manifestations of the inoperative city; an accumulation of disparate spatial experiences without a binding order, where form and void coincide. [1] The concept of urban crack is similar to 'site' recalling the meaning given to it by Anne Cauquelin: "Le site se trouve à l'intersection du lieu et de l'espace, ce n'est ni l'un ni l'autre, mais une sorte d'hybride." [2] ("A site finds itself at the intersection of place and space, it is neither the one nor the other, but a kind of hybrid.") Urban cracks are hybrid spaces since they belong to the measured and organized public space as well as to the intimate domain. These functionally indeterminate sites seem to have grown rather than planned and therefore appear to be the reverse of urbanism, "because they obviously do belong to the city." [3] Moreover, urban cracks belong to a constantly changing city, where houses are built and pulled down, where vacant lots emerge and disappear. These spaces regularly await a future destination within the context of urban renewal.

Last year, Elly Van Eeghem started working in one of the most profoundly transforming neighborhoods in the city of Ghent. The northern dockland area of Muide-Meulestede-Afrikalaan is subject to a large-scale urban renewal project that converts it into a new district by the water. A peculiar spot on Oceaniëstraat struck her: a leftover space surrounded by an industrial site, a private residence and a passageway for trucks and inhabitants of a nearby housing block. It is mainly used for illegal dumping and thus considered by many residents as a thorn in the flesh.

Van Eeghem decided to observe this place for several weeks, each visit setting up her camera. From these repeated returns originated an audiovisual chronicle of her performance in the space in addition

to the performance of the space. This ultimately resulted in an installation of both video and text: Oceaniëstraat recto/verso. [4]

The inlet jumped out of all other places.

One of the smallest gaps I encountered in the area

intimate

manageable.

A small triangle, cut out between large sites of productivity, inviting to be used

to leave something behind (that you no longer need)

to ask a question

to launch a proposal.

The inlet suggested something

something I'm still peeling off.

Week after week, Van Eeghem built structures using waste materials encountered on the spot, gradually writing a sentence on the wall: "Feel free to act and to proceed in whatever you do." Her interventions questioned the way in which to intervene as an artist in a constructive and critical manner, how layered and charged words can become when landing in a place like this. We experienced video to be a medium with the potential to trigger encounters with passers-by, to open discussion and to unveil conflicting logics of the city.

Artists Reshaping Urban Cracks

"Speed calls for emptiness and emptiness screams for haste." [5]

More and more urban policy makers appear to be concerned about empty space, afraid of losing control of what might arise from it. In an attempt to organize and boost vacant land, they often set up alliances with inventive forces of artists and creative non-profit organizations, offering them a temporary 'breeding ground.' Temporary, because the construction blueprints are already drawn, awaiting implementation. This way, certain creative groups no longer need to illegally claim their field of activity and are supposed to give rise to new dynamics and interests in the area.

In the mission statement on public art in the city of Ghent it is put forward that temporary interventions should generate dynamics. Yet, what kind of dynamics are aimed at? And are those the same dynamics artists intend to generate? Because the breeding ground scenario holds potential instrumentalization risks for artists: by engaging themselves in a dominant logic of city branding, their intentions might turn against them. [6] By making the area attractive to investors, project developers and high-income groups of residents, their work risks to be put on as a beautifying and boosting project. As Rosalyn Deutsche

alerted, this kind of promotion of art appears to politically neutralize its use within the city and to mask its political outcomes. [7]

Who selects the icons?

What is to become a landmark and what is to be ignored?

Do the housing blocks at Scandinaviëstraat just need a brighter color?

How does a landmark differ from public art?

Should public art truly render the city more beautiful? (than it really is)

Or more transparent? (than it appears)

Considering these questions, we do believe artists can play a critical role in (re-)imaging of the city. Public art can reveal ambivalent logics and practices. Will a crowd barrier transformed into a bench invite people to sit on? Does a car that is parked upside down still respect the public road code? What happens when we add color to public fountains?

Artists can bring into visibility the city's logics and are able to reinterpret, short-circuit or recompose them. Through their work, they can narrate changing urban conditions.

Throughout the city, vacant voids are being filled with structures.

Is this a different design? (I mean: no design at all.)

Starting from what is already there, creating new structures, entangled with the place

its history, its current use. (a prediction for tomorrow)

Maybe that is the attractive thing about working with waste materials

because nobody has expectations.

If I get the old computer screens neatly in a row, the inlet could look at us

maybe not in a blaming or a reflecting way. Just as a point of view

but differently.

A language textbook, a puzzle, a hobbyhorse. Puppets against the wall.

Pale green seat cushions as the front row of this dumping ground scenography.

An invitation to look at what is present. And how it changes.

As Moritz Küng stated, “the city no longer occupies a clearly delimited space, but has become a bewildering and dynamic terrain vague consisting of shifting neighborhoodly coexistences. In consequence, its identity has constantly to be re-explored and re-defined.” [8] Artists can adopt this role as counterweights to a dominant imaging of the city. Through the embedding of artwork in urban cracks, these spaces might turn out to be indicators of existing frictions within urban culture. As the breakdown situated in the interstitial mechanical spaces of a building often reports an entire unstable construction, urban cracks can tell us something about a precarious urban planning predominantly driven by economic concerns.

Urban Cracks Challenge to Rethink Public Art

It is precisely the interstitial, complex character of urban cracks that can influence a dominant view of the city as well as the dominant conception of public art as a monumental landmark in public space. Does the constantly changing city not petition another way of situating art in public space?

Repeated returns to the same place create space for unforeseen encounters.

How do others interpret this sentence?

How do they look at the inlet?

How free do they feel in the area to do what they want?

Returning to the inlet to take a last picture, a man is looking for a new pair of shoes.

Reluctantly, I make him part of my last image.

You can only get away from something you return to. What you return to, is the place. The place is the crack that links leaving and returning. The place is the space of this turnabout. Architecture knows this so well: therefore it makes corners. Because in a circle, no turning is possible. (D. Lauwaert)

The undefined and layered identity of urban cracks, which attracts artists because of its openness to interpretation and counterproposal, necessitate time to grasp the space. These spaces demand what Elly Van Eeghem calls the ‘tactics of slow return’: to regularly call on the same space, allowing different perspectives to meet.

This relates to an alternative conception of public art as a dynamic paradigm of thought. In this regard, public art is not necessarily of a permanent nature but might as well include temporary interventions and symbolic gestures. “A movable structure is not necessarily temporary. What is seemingly transitory and ephemeral, processual and only a body of images, is often, by its illusion of stability, more durable than our eroding stone monuments.” [9]

We imagine localized artistic practice not merely as the site-specific features of the artwork or the amount of community involvement, but primarily as the engagement of the artist to profoundly embed his/her work into an existing context. In a way, this is at odds with both the implanted monuments in public space and participative projects “engaging every-one but offending no-one.” [10]

Through this interpretation of public art, the city functions as a starting point and the artwork as a trigger. Focusing on things already present instead of on a newly added value. As Anne Cauquelin said: “La ville ne devrait pas servir de galerie à un monument supplémentaire conçu en dehors d’elle. Si la ville est oeuvre d’art, c’est dans ses pierres, dans sa manière d’être.” [11] (“The city should not be used as an art gallery for an additional monument designed out of the city. If the city is a work of art, it is in its stones, in its way of being.”) In consequence, the artwork is not merely an object, but a transformed perception of the environment. Through such interventions, artists map urban spaces in their own way. Their ‘design on the spot’ (as Patrick Geddes would have called it) becomes a performance of the space, rather than a representation or description of it.

Thus, they balance between the political and the poetic, about which Francis Alÿs wondered: “Can an artistic intervention truly bring about an unforeseen way of thinking, or is it more a matter of creating a sensation of meaninglessness that shows the absurdity of the situation? Can an artistic intervention translate social tensions into narratives that in turn intervene in the imaginary landscape of a place? Can an absurd act provoke a transgression that makes you abandon the standard assumptions about the sources of conflict?” [12]

The Artwork as Palimpsest of the Present City

We believe artistic practice embedded in urban cracks can independently generate a layered analysis and dynamic narration of our changing urban condition.

In the neighborhood of Muide-Meulestede-Afrikalaan, we tried to capture in what way urban cracks write back to the present city through diverse layers and remnants. How these spaces develop as metaphoric ‘palimpsests’: old manuscripts where different layers of writing shine through. Van Eeghem used multi-exposure lomographs to construct mosaic cityscapes that exhibit the accumulated iterations of a site; searching for traces of vanished human activity, fragmenting the chaotic city and reconstructing it according to her own logic.

Besides these fixed images, video proved to be an ideal medium to build a palimpsestic reading of urban cracks. Van Eeghem was able to reinterpret the site at Oceaniëstraat by working with diverse video layers during editing and manipulating the dimension of time.

Apart from that, the performative element of filming her own interventions functioned as a trigger for people to talk about what was happening in the neighborhood. Yet, sometimes the camera proved to be a barrier for people to start a conversation or made them walk away faster than they normally would have.

Back in Oceaniëstraat, there is a police car standing in front of the inlet.

The officer has found addresses in the dumped waste. He advises me not to work here, because the smell is obnoxious.

Whether he has noticed that there are old tracks buried in the earth?

He hands me his card.

Sint-Amandsberg district police officer. We are responsible for this area.

I wonder what he means by we. I wonder why police districts have different borders

and what this means (for him)

being responsible for an area.

The finalized installation was presented in a variety of contexts, from art galleries over community centers to academic symposia and student seminars. During each presentation, the reactions on the work were filmed: how the installation provoked communication, how it left some people indifferent or made others laugh or frown. This way, the performative character of the work continued and different perspectives and backgrounds started to cross. We experienced that the totality of the work managed to bridge certain gaps. Between the local and the global, the artistic and the academic, the experience and its representation.

References and Notes:

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2. IUP Website, "Interview d'Anne Cauquelin par Thierry Paquot," October, 1999, <http://urbanisme.u-pec.fr/documentation/paroles/anne-cauquelin-64781.kjsp> (accessed December 2, 2010).
3. Zsuzsanna Gahse, "A Small Essay at Cities," in *Another & Another & Another Act of Seeing (Urban Space)*, eds. Moritz Küng and Katrien Vandermarliere, 204 (Antwerp: deSingel, 1997).
4. Text fragments in this paper are excerpts from this installation.
5. Paul Virilio, *L'Horizon Négatif: Essai de Dromoscopie* (Paris: Galilée, 1984).
6. Griet Verschelden, et al., "Positioning Community Art Practices in Urban Cracks," in *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 31, no. 3 (2012): 277-291.
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10. Patricia Phillips, "Out of Order: The Public Art Machine," in *Artforum* 27, no. 4 (1988): 95.
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12. Francis Alÿs, *A Story of Deception* (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), 39.