**Abstract**

This paper interrogates the political potential of socially engaged art within an urban setting. Grounded in Lefebvrian and neo-Marxist critical urban theory, this political potential is examined according to three analytics that mark the definition of ‘politics’ in this context: the (re)configuration of urban space, the (re)framing of a particular sphere of experience and the (re)thinking of what is taken-for-granted. By bringing together literatures from a range of academic domains, these analytics are used to examine 1) how socially engaged art may expand our understanding of the link between the material environment and the production of urban imaginaries and meanings, and 2) how socially engaged art can open up productive ways of thinking about and engaging with urban space.

**Keywords**

art, urban space, materiality, participation, imaginaries, social engagement, politics

**I Introduction**

This paper discusses the political potential of socially engaged art, in terms of how this artform may produce urban imaginaries that intervene in the social and material processes of city making. I here situate the political potential of socially engaged art within a Lefebvrian and neo-Marxist critical theory and use this approach to analyse 1) how socially engaged art may expand our understanding of the link between the material environment and the production of urban imaginaries and meanings, and 2) how this form of artistic practice can work back on our everyday spatial ordering principles to open up novel and productive ways of thinking about and engaging with urban space.

The political potential of artistic practice for opening up new imaginaries and for expanding the horizons of what can be said, thought, seen and even felt is recognized by a wide range of scholars (Bonnett, 1992; Loftus, 2009; Pinder, 2011; Hawkins, 2013). As Rancière (2004) argues, art can be seen to foster an autonomous experience that suspends the domination of the ‘system’. This is because the undecidability of the experience implies a challenge to familiar categorizations, such as established views, assigned usage and the spatially constructed order – what Rancière terms ‘the distribution of the sensible’ (2004: 12). This ‘distribution of the sensible’ is strongly linked to the distribution of places: ‘What are these places? How do they function? Why are they there? Who can occupy them? […] It is always a matter of knowing who is qualified to say what a particular place is and what is done in it’ (Rancière, 2003: 201).

This question of the distribution of places, has increasingly become the focus of a variety of collaborative, participatory, and community-based artistic practices that fall under the umbrella term of socially engaged art. Common to these practices is that they engage not only with a specific group of people, but also with their social and cultural concerns (Cartiere, 2016). Accordingly, socially engaged art is often firmly embedded in the place in which it is sited, grappling with its social conditions, political context and unique history.

As I illustrate in this paper, by actively taking into account and working with specific sites in relation to the virtual dimension of urban society, socially engaged art has the potential to facilitate a negotiation of taken-for-granted spatial orderings of the world, and to provide alternative urban imaginaries that place in bold relief the constructible and destructible nature of social habits and urban structures alike. Political action can here be defined in line with Marchart (2011, drawing on Rancière, 2004), as a (re)configuration of a specific space, a (re)framing of a particular sphere of experience or matter of concern, and a (re)thinking of what is taken-for-granted and demarcated as visible and invisible. A political act, then, refuses what is presented to us as given, but at the same time does not lose sight of what already is, and begins from the activities in which people are engaged (see e.g. Purcell, 2014). The production of urban imaginaries is central to this notion of politics.

The concept of urban imaginaries refers to the somatic and cognitive images we carry within us of the places where we live our everyday lives. It is what Huyssen defines as ‘an embodied material fact’ that is part of any city’s reality: ‘[w]hat we think about a city and how we perceive it informs the ways we act in it’ (2008: 3). This understanding of the importance and potential of producing and expanding our urban imaginaries chimes with Lefebvre’s (2003) call for an approach to urban society as a ‘virtual object’. To Lefebvre, ‘the virtual’ refers to a dimension that has not yet been realized but is a horizon toward which we can move. This virtual dimension of urban society is important in order to interrogate the interplay between the imagined and the material in a way that encompasses the conditions of both the known world and the horizon of possible worlds.

The paper examines this virtual dimension of socially engaged art according to the three analytics that mark Rancière’s (2004) definition of political action: the (re)configuration of urban space, the (re)thinking of what is taken-for-granted and the (re)framing of a particular sphere of experience. By applying a neo-Marxist critique within these three analytics, this paper offers an important contribution to debates within geography on the political potential of socially engaged art in urban contexts. Central to this contribution is a challenge to the idea that new critical urban theories, such as assemblage urbanism (McFarlane, 2011; Bender, 2010), which focus on the affective processes and practices through which materiality comes into being, are best suited to critique the ‘immaterial’ relationalities in socially engaged art (see e.g. Hawkins 2013). Adventurous and innovative approaches to site that encourage greater attention to embodied ways of being, doing and knowing are indeed important for examining the political potential of socially engaged art. But there is a risk here of cutting out half the equation by sidelining the material conditions that are part of socially engaged art to begin with, as well as those produced through the encounters taking place within it. By considering ‘the context of context’ (Brenner et al. 2011: 234) this paper fosters an understanding of the potential field of political action in socially engaged art as being not solely about mobilising sites, representing various perspectives and portraying multiple urban imaginaries, but also about recognizing the opportunities and limits within these sites for enabling or constraining the creation of such multiple imaginaries.

To explore this potential field of political action, the paper starts by outlining some of the challenges faced by socially engaged art when working within an urban context. The complexity of urban struggles for change is here foregrounded, pointing to the need to adopt a more nuanced analysis of the political potential of socially engaged art. The paper goes on to discuss the value of the neo-Marxist approach to providing such a nuanced analysis. It argues that by foregrounding the interdependence of urban imaginaries and material environments, this approach may oppose false and simplistic binaries and welcome contradiction as a productive and generative force in bringing about change. This argument is further illustrated in the first analytic, ‘(Re)configuring space’. This analytic points to how socially engaged art may use contradiction to raise critical questions about the spatial and material organization of cities. The second analytic, ‘(Re)thinking what is taken for granted’, addresses the potential of socially engaged art to encourage a re-articulation of dominant urban narratives and ‘givens’, such as for example the discursive construction of ‘community’ and the formation of solidarity. Finally, the third analytic, ‘(Re)framing experience’, points to the importance of socially engaged art in facilitating a critical and transformative experience that moves beyond the limits of the present and enables participants to act on other possibilities for being.

**II Socially engaged art in an urban context**

As Brenner et al. (2011: 226) points out, ‘[t]he “urban question” famously posed four decades ago by Lefebvre, Harvey and Castells remains as essential as ever’. Urbanization is rapidly transforming global landscapes and cities are increasingly seen as agents for change (Hajer, 2016). Hence, cities are constantly looking for new trajectories to find solutions for pressing issues of our times, such as the climate crisis, migration, the future of work, and health and care, that are particularly manifest in cities. Accordingly, in this current era of urban upheaval, socially engaged art has come to be valued as a crucial creative means of empowerment in the midst of urban transformation.

As Pinder (2011) observes, there is a tendency for critics and writers to deploy celebratory and undifferentiated notions of resistance when discussing the potential for contemporary artistic practice to effect social change. This celebration of resistance among critics and writers can be seen in relation to a liberatory and oppositional political potential that geographers have long located in art. The perceived potential of art has its roots in a long tradition of cultural theory treating the streets as the place for resistance, opposition, disruption, and protest, as for example in the works of Lefebvre (1991) , Perec (1997), and de Certeau (1984). It can also be seen in relation to the politics and poetics of the performative walking practices of the Situationist International. Similarly, the focus on site-specificity in socially engaged art can be traced back to its development alongside the advent of Fluxus, Performance and Conceptual art in the ‘60s and ‘70s. Performance here exited the designated performance spaces and entered into, for example, urban contexts.

The social uprisings of the 1960s and ‘70s, in Central Europe and Paris in particular, provide an important framework for understanding the focus on art’s potential for resistance and opposition. In these uprisings, the street was seen as the characterisation of the everyday, and thus was framed in opposition to the central power, characterised by the enclosed offices of experts and ministers (see e.g. Castells, 1983; de Certeau, 1984). Massey (2005) critiques this framework for introducing a dichotomy between power and structure on the one hand, and resistance and agency on the other, which divides the space of the city in two: the city structure vs. the resistances in the street. As Massey argues, this binary implies a conception of power as a static and monolithic order. Furthermore, it risks romanticizing a mobile ‘resistance’ of tactics and everyday practices as inherently political and thus neglecting a careful examination of the politics of these tactics and practices.

Social struggles are far more complex and segmented than is implied when they are considered as being inherently political or directed towards a monolithic power structure. The struggles of urban inhabitants include a range of different identities and political interests set against an array of social and spatial structures (Purcell, 2002). An increasingly important aspect of this complexity, is the rise of digital art and activism, offering new understandings of the virtual dimensions of the urban. As Zebracki (2017: 446) points out, our digital networked reality has become ‘a holistic action space’ that ﻿stresses ‘how the virtual has become a full and indelible part of the majority of people’s participation in digitalised societies’. Zebracki (2017) here provides a useful account of how social engagement with public artworks operates within digitally networked space. What is perhaps more important to note for the purposes of this paper, is how, as Castells (2012: 15) points out, the Internet has created ‘a new species of social movement’. In the face of so-called ‘Twitter and Facebook revolutions’ (Schradie, 2018), social platforms are seen as having the potential to enable networked clusters of people to coalesce, respond and mobilize, thus amplifying messages beyond individuals and specific communities (Kuo, 2018). Circulating hashtags (e.g. #blacklivesmatter, #metoo) is seen as helping to make, for example, racial justice and feminist issues become more visible to publics who may not be aware of or exposed to these inequities. However, it is also argued that digital media has made citizens act less as members of an organization and more as individual users participating in activism (Schradie, 2018; Earl, Copeland and Bimber, 2017; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Social media is here seen to foster an extension of social engagement into the private sphere of individuals and their everyday lives, turning individual action into the performance and expression of the ‘I’, while partially losing the representative function of the ‘we’ (Milan, 2015). Hence, while helping to organize collective action, social media platforms may work at the expense of fundamental group dynamics such as internal solidarity, commitment and responsibility towards fellow citizens (Milan, 2015).

This complexity of social struggle raises several concerns for artistic practices that aim to promote social change: How can artistic practices contest complex power systems without trying to reduce them to fixed structures that limit and constrain subjugated groups? How can artistic practices foster group dynamics in which the ‘we’ is more important than the ‘I’? How can artistic practices avoid being merely reactive to what is presumed to be there already, and rather be generative of new identities and histories that are responsive to various productions of urban space? How to avoid falling into the trap of too easily reifying conflict as the foundational characteristic of the political potential of artistic practice when trying to make visible what the dominant consensus tends to obliterate and obscure? How to adopt a nuanced, rather than antagonistic, approach that addresses ‘the varied abilities of artistic practices to challenge –or not- prevailing norms and power relations’ (Pinder, 2011: 688)?

Scrutinizing the relationship between socially engaged art and urban space is key to answering these questions. For the purpose of this paper I define urban space in line with the well-known definition by Massey (2005) as a social and contingent construction that is always in the process of becoming. Furthermore, urban space is the product of interrelations and a multiplicity of encounters (Massey, 2005; Wilson, 2016). The happenstance, liveliness and risk of these encounters are what make the urban a site in which the boundaries of the ‘givens’ and what is normal are constantly negotiated (Lefebvre et al., 1996; Merrifield, 2013; Wilson, 2016). The move from conceiving of space as being outside human existence - as a backdrop against which human behaviour is played out – to seeing space as being socially produced and playing an active role in shaping social life, is central to the neo-Marxist approach that I will discuss in the next section.

**III The Neo-Marxist approach**

Hawkins (2013) emphasises that the potential field of political action of socially engaged art lies in the subversive force of aesthetic engagement with space and in a re-interrogation of the role and position of the subject in this regard. Critiques of socially engaged art accordingly tend to focus on the immaterial and subject-centred relations produced within this artform. It is argued that, while neo-Marxist spatial theories (e.g. Smith and Katz, 1993; Soja, 2000; Harvey, 2000; Massey, 2005; Lefebvre, 2003) are apt to critique and scrutinize object-based art, the focus on these ‘immaterial’ relationalities in socially engaged art raises new questions about art-site relations and their politics (see e.g. Hawkins, 2013). New critical urban theories, such as assemblage urbanism, are useful to address these questions as they contribute valuable insights in terms of the intensity of relations in and through which the materiality of the urban consists. McFarlane, for example, links the assemblage idea with the virtual dimension of the urban and a critical ‘imaginary’ (2011: 219) that, in line with Lefebvre’s critical theory, focuses on the relationship between the actual and the possible. However, as Brenner et al. (2011) argue, this understanding of the virtual dimension of the urban is significantly different from the dialectical neo-Marxist approach to the virtual as advocated by Lefebvre. In McFarlane’s account, potentiality is an exteriority that lies *outside* of the present assemblage, rather than being understood as historically specific or immanent to the material relations that are scrutinized. According to Brenner et al. this approach is problematic in that it does not offer a sustained account of how, when and why particular critical alternatives may be pursued under specific historical-geographical conditions and why some (re)configurations, (re)framings and (re)thinkings are actualized over and against others. Hence, Brenner et al. emphasise the need for not only engaging with the materials themselves, but also with the political-economic structures and institutions in which they are embedded.

Shifting focus from Brenner’s critique of assemblage urbanism to critiques of socially engaged art, the risk of neglecting the limits and demands of the social world is found in approaches to socially engaged art that focus solely on the subject-centred relations produced within it, and that celebrate these relations for offering an unmediated authentic relationship to the world. One example in this regard is the contribution to conceptualize and institutionalize the socially engaged art of the ‘90s presented by Nicolas Bourriaud, the ‘founding father’ of so-called ‘relational aesthetics’ (2002). Bourriaud here defines relational art as ‘[a] set of practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space’ (2002: 113). More generally, Bourriaud seems to make a separation between the social and the material, non-social world. Space is separated from the social by being seen as non-relational and individual/isolated, rather than as the sphere of exchange and interactivity belonging to the social world. Space then, seems to be locked in the position of a static container or backdrop which is to be enacted by the ‘actors and extras’ that make their way across it: ‘It is no longer possible to regard the contemporary work as a space to be walked through (...) it is henceforth presented as a period of time to be lived through’ (p. 15). And he continues: ‘The exhibition may have turned into a set, but who comes to act in it? How do the actors and extras make their way across it, and in the midst of what kind of scenery?’ (p. 74). In this context, there is a risk of the material environment being seen as fixed and static, while any kind of transformation only happens within what Bourriaud terms the ‘materialism of encounter’ (p. 18), meaning the bonds that link humankind together in social forms.

My problem with Bourriaud’s Relational Aesthetics is not that he engages excessively with the social, but rather that he does not engage sufficiently with the material. Rancière accordingly critiques Bourriaud for seeing relational aesthetics as ‘arrangements of art that immediately present themselves as social relations’ that are not mediatised by forms (cited in Bourriaud, 2009: 1). In response, Bourriaud emphasises that he does indeed consider ‘the concrete reality of the work’ such as ‘the colours, the disposition of elements in space, the dialogue with the exhibition space, the formal structure of the installation’ and so on (p. 2). Bourriaud is here equating the material with reality, with ‘giving an exact idea of what it is actually like’ (ibid.). By creating this clear distinction between ‘the material’ as a realm of reassuringly tangible or graspable objects and the non-material social world of relational aesthetics, Bourriaud fails to take into consideration the virtual dimension of the material as advocated by Lefebvre. Accordingly, Bourriaud’s approach risks constructing socially engaged art as a free and open space that unproblematically overcomes the demands of the social world instead of engaging with and negotiating material and social differentials (of power, resources and authority).

By focusing on the dialectical neo-Marxist perspective, this paper offers an alternative approach in which there is no ‘outside’ from which critique or opposition can be articulated. Change is only enabled in relation to present structures and systems rather than as an escape from them. The potential of this approach can be illustrated with an example borrowed from Dikeç (2012). Consider a jigsaw puzzle and a mosaic as two different ‘models’ for thinking about socially engaged art. In the puzzle, pieces can be physically moved around, but they only fit in one way. There is only one rational and predetermined way of assembling the pieces. In the mosaic, on the other hand, it is possible to imagine a variety of combinations without even moving the pieces around. The individual pieces are in the mosaic, but the final outline is not given. Depending on the outline you imagine, different pieces will be related to each other, producing different forms and making new connections each time.

Socially engaged art is stuck in the jigsaw puzzle model when it is considered to come from an ‘outside’ that is inherently liberatory, communitarian or political. This position depends on splitting the world into two levels: the false and oppressive representative hegemony of everyday life, and the good and pure reality revealed through socially engaged art. Rather than mediating between urban imaginaries and the material environment, this approach foregrounds their mutual incompatibility.

The model of the mosaic starts from a different position: socially engaged art is not an ‘outside’ to everyday life. Rather this practice is, along with everyday life, an equally integral component of the larger system called our life-world. The interdependence of urban imaginaries and the material environment is here foregrounded. This interdependence focuses on contradictions and limits, and moves the debate away from the stalemate produced by stubborn opposition, shifting attention to new avenues where productive change can be brought about. In the first analytic, I will illustrate how socially engaged art accordingly may question the spatial and material organization of urban space through a focus on contradictions and limits.

**IV (Re)configuring space**

The first analytic of the politics of socially engaged art that I propose in this paper, is that of the potential of this artform for (re)configuring urban space. This analytic examines how a virtual approach to urban space may reveal its constructedness and open up a questioning of our material surroundings. It also points to the importance of avoiding the creation of simple binaries between a homogenized and ‘controlled’ urban space vs. an open and liberatory urban space, and instead to scrutinize the often-suppressed contradictions within artistic as well as urban processes.

 In order to better understand this analytic, it is worth looking more closely at Lefebvre’s understanding of the virtual in relation to his concept of utopia. While radical geographers, planners and sociologists alike have been wary of utopian thought, Pinder (2015) insists on the emancipatory potentials of utopian perspectives in relation to urban space. Lefebvre’s utopianism is central to Pinder’s argument concerning the potential significance of utopia for current critical urban theory. According to Lefebvre, a utopian critique should be an instrument for exploring the real. Hence, he demands a careful scrutiny of how urban imaginaries and utopian visions become grounded in particular places and forms, and how their spaces become appropriated, adapted and lived (Pinder, 2015). This form of critique, according to Lefebvre, has the ability to step back from the real in order to cut a path that leads beyond the actual world already realized and toward a possible world yet to come (Purcell, 2014).

According to Brenner (2012), the disjuncture between the actual and the possible is key to critical urban theory in that it facilitates the reappropriation of the possibilities that are repressed or embedded in current conditions. The contradiction between possible imaginary space, and actual space may here offer an emancipatory urban space (Pratt and San Juan, 2004). This emancipatory space should not be seen as a concrete urban form, but rather as a process that implies the capacity to question concrete experiences of specific places and societies. It is, as Jameson points out, ‘the detective work of a decipherment and a reading of Utopian clues and traces in the landscape of the real’ (2009: 415). In this context, contradiction can work as an active and generative force in questioning given ‘truths’ and identities. This questioning relates to an awareness of contradictions between what is (re)presented to us as real and what we experience as being real.

Take for example the film The Truman Show (1998). Truman is completely unaware that his life is the focus of a reality TV show aired since his birth, that the town in which he lives is a giant set piece, and that everyone around him is an actor going by a script. It is when Truman becomes aware of the contradictions within his controlled life (at some point he deviates from the route of his everyday walk and discovers the ‘backstage’ area where actors are having a break) that that he develops a desire to overcome both the given truth (life in Seaside as he knows it) and its opposition (the constructed Seaside that is revealed to him). The philosopher Alexandre Kojève (1969, cited in Broto 2015, 462) accordingly argues that: ‘to become aware of a contradiction is necessarily to want to remove it. Now, one can in fact overcome contradiction of a given existence only by modifying the given existence, by transforming it through actions’. As Broto (2015) points out, contradictions can be seen as activating a desire for intervention and thus providing a perspective that enables a diagnosis of instances of concrete reality. In this view, then, one may argue that the political potential of socially engaged art lies not in trying to provide concrete alternatives and ways of overcoming contradictions, but rather in using these contradictions to raise critical questions about the spatial and material organization of the urban environment. Accordingly, socially engaged art may disrupt a dominant narrative of a city and denaturalize the relationships between elements, suggesting that they can always be re-articulated in different arrangements (Highmore, 2002).

However, it is important not to uncritically celebrate socially engaged art for effecting social change simply by ‘revealing’ the constructedness, multiplicity and contradictions of the world. Everyday urban space is often defined according to its ‘throwntogetherness’ (Massey, 2005) and represented as a pell-mell of different worlds colliding. As Massey (2005: 111) observes ‘[i]t is popular today to revel in the glorious random mixity of it all. Chaos is taken to be a form of rebellion against over-rationalisation and the dominance of closed structures’. This easy critique, which frequently associates order and uniformity with ‘planning’ or ‘the state’, tends to forget how the market or other non-state social forces hide their powers behind ‘the new love affair with chaos’ (Massey, 2005: 112). Accordingly, Joseph observes how ‘[t]he association of homogeny with hegemony is a false one, as the explicit promotion of diversity in contemporary capitalism demonstrates’ (2002: 61). The aim of art to break free from a rational and homogenized society by dismantling the barriers that separate everyday life from art and re-enchanting the world through a focus on desire, creativity and imagination has been rendered into new forms of capital accumulation through, for example, the cultural industries and strategies of city branding. As Pile points out, cities have increasingly become part of the machinery of commodified dreams and desires: ‘dream homes with dream mortgages, dream loans for dream holidays, dream hair to go with dream lingeries…’ (2005: 167).

This focus on dreams, imaginations, chance and the pell-mell of colliding worlds ensures the impossibility of closure and the indeterminacy of space, ultimately rendering it unrepresentable (Massey, 2005). Whereas this unrepresentability is praised for having a liberatory potential due to its ‘freeing’ diversity, it may in fact reproduce current structural conditions rather than change them: by privileging an understanding of society as unrepresentable, celebrating what cannot be expressed rather than what can, capitalism challenges the possibilities for a sustained critique of the established order of things (Joseph, 2002). Hence, present structural/social conditions make it hard to articulate or even imagine alternatives.

This, however, does not mean that socially engaged art that tries to resist closed and homogeneous conceptions of space possesses no value today; rather it reinforces the importance of scrutinizing these particular engagements in terms of how they address the relationships between people and spaces, and accordingly encourages a (re)thinking of what is taken for granted.

**V (Re)thinking what is taken for granted**

The second analytic revolves around how socially engaged art may provide frameworks for re-thinking what is taken for granted in order to scrutinize the conditions that underpin the articulation of urban imaginaries and ultimately to expand them. This re-thinking relates to a constant interrogation of figures of foundation, such as ‘the essence’ of identity and community, in an urban context. Accordingly, this analytic foregrounds that socially engaged art is not inherently communal and does not automatically make people part of a community. Socially engaged art is a contradictory practice which may foster both conflict and coherence, antagonism and consensus. This makes possible unexpected connections and openings that, to use Haraway’s words, enable us ‘to see together without claiming to be another’ (1988, 586). Accordingly, socially engaged art may open up possibilities for a drive to equality in which ‘difference’ fosters solidarity with people that are not like ourselves. To better understand how this potential of socially engaged art relates to the articulation, and expansion, of urban imaginaries, it is worth having a closer look at how urban imaginaries are formed in contemporary cities and to what effect.

Contemporary cities are characterized by a growing presence and juxtaposition of diversity and difference. Combined with the previously mentioned focus on multiplicity, dreams and imaginations in relation to urban space, this characterisation of cities is associated with heightened individualism, the breakdown of collective identities and an implicit politics of separation and division (Bauman, 2007: Raco, 2018). Urban imaginaries, then, exist in contradictory forms and are characterised as much by prejudice and the sense of the jarring of juxtaposed subjectivities as they are by openness and tolerance towards ‘the other’ (Thrift, 2005). In other words, urban imaginaries involve a multitude of perspectives and subject positions differentiated by class, race, gender, age, education and religion, and therefore any attempt to develop socially engaged art to expand them, should, as Raco (2018) points out, focus on understanding the intersectionalities and interplays between cultural constructions and material conditions.

While originally applied to the experiences of black women, ‘intersectionality might be more useful as a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics’ (Crenshaw, 1991: 1296, cited in Hopkins, 2017: 2). As Raco (2018) points out, multiple perspectives and identities are held by subjects in a dialectical manner. In some contexts, socially engaged art may thus facilitate processes that result in mutual learning and a desire to re-shape subjectivities. However, given the dialectical and fluid nature of identity formation, socially engaged art may also generate hostility and divergence with specific types of difference and with certain groups.

Accordingly, one has to abandon the idea that socially engaged art automatically makes people part of a collective, in and of itself. The discursive construction of community is central here. As Kwon (2004) points out, unquestioned presumptions tend to designate the community as a group of people identified with each other by a set of common concerns or backgrounds, who are collectively oppressed by the dominant culture and with whom socially engaged art seeks to establish a collaborative relationship. In this regard, Kwon expresses concerns about attempts to essentialise cultural and social identity by seeing the objectives and identity of a coherent community as determined by its members before any encounter occurs with outside individuals or groups, including community artists.

These concerns about the collaborative relationships that are developed through socially engaged art relate to a fierce debate between art critics Claire Bishop and Grant Kester. Kester seeks to ally artistic collaboration with an idea of an ethical process that overcomes material and social differentials (of power, resources and authority) by providing an open space where these differentials are sidelined in favour of consensual dialogue. Bishop, on the other hand, advocates against reducing art to moral criteria. According to her, Kester jeopardizes the political potential of socially engaged art by focusing on a consensual dialogue that depends on a given equality of voices. As Rancière (1999) points out, equality is not a given, but a contingent that has to be taken as a supposition and constantly verified by opening up scenes of demonstration and enunciation. Insisting upon consensual dialogue, then, risks becoming a repressive norm in itself, as all forms of authorship are equated with authority and indicted as totalising. As Bishop observes, ‘[s]uch a denigration of authorship allows simplistic oppositions to remain in place: active versus passive viewer, egoistical versus collaborative artist, privileged versus needy community […]’ (2012: 25). For Bishop, collaborative art should not focus on consensual dialogue, but on antagonism, conflict and disturbance as crucial elements of artistic experience. Drawing on the political theories of Laclau and Mouffe, Bishop conceptualises ‘relational antagonism’ as being predicated ‘not on social harmony, but on exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of this harmony’ (2004: 79). In a similar vein, Kwon advocates an art that reckons with the impossibility of community and quotes Nancy: ‘There is no communion, there is no common being, but there is being in common’ (Kwon, 2004: 153).

Rancière takes the idea of the impossibility of community further in The Emancipated Spectator: ‘in a theatre, or in front of a performance, just as in a museum, at a school, or on the street, there are only individuals, weaving their own way through the forests of words, acts, and things that stand in front of them or around them’ (2007: 278). What Rancière and Kwon point to here, is the difference between the conditions of the (im)possibility of society and the various attempts nevertheless to construct society partially.

Butler’s notion of ‘contingent foundations’ is helpful to understand the political potential in recognizing the (im)possibility of society. These contingent foundations are, as Marchart (2011) points out, plural and temporal - they can be reversed, and they have to be established against conflicting foundational attempts. A democratic regime, according to Marchart, is a regime that accepts, even promotes, the absence of an ultimate ground. That which is contingent opens up possibilities that things could have been otherwise. Accordingly, socially engaged art may open a politics, or political action, in which we seek to lay new grounds and do not doubt our ability to do so. Hence, whereas it is impossible to realize a community or, for that matter, democracy, once and for all, it is possible to supplement a final ground with ‘contingent foundations’ that are perpetually negotiated and (re)actualized.

In recognizing difference as an important part of being ‘together’, then, one may open up a form of socially engaged art, which is not based on the idea of a shared pre-existent condition of ‘community’ or on the formation of a common identity (‘being-us’). Rather than re-assembling multiplicity in a common world, socially engaged art is here seen as encouraging the aggregation of singularities (‘being-together’) by creating a multiplicity of worlds (Badiou, 2007). These singularities should not be conflated with self-fulfilling neo-liberal subjects that is led by the market to reproduce, expand, and reinforce competitive relations between themselves. Whereas these competitive relations foster inequality, the ‘being-together’ that is advocated above is based on a drive to equality in which ‘difference’ is seen as a constitutive part of shift in identification. Encouraged by the focus on imagination and creativity through positive affective and emotional registers, as mentioned previously, socially engaged art may encourage people to engage with the complexity of the world around them by recognizing difference, while, at the same time, reaching out to one another in solidarity, acknowledging common beliefs and shared responsibilities.

As Marchart (2011) points out, solidarity has for a long time referred to a mutual bond within a given social group or community—solidarity among those similar to each other. However, Marchart claims that this position is more about interest- or identity politics, and that the term ‘solidarity’ only makes sense where one declares oneself in solidarity with others who are *not* already part of the same community (e.g. solidarity by heterosexuals with gay-marriage). In consequence, one has to establish a relation of solidarity with someone who precisely does not share ones’own position. This requires an act of ‘self-alienation’ in terms of having, at least partially, to dis-identify with one’s own identity and position (Marchart, 2011: 970). To Foucault transgressing the limits of who one is can only be the result of elaborating on the question of what or who one is, as it is posed through a process of transformative experience, that provides new terms in which this can be formulated. (cited in Lemke, 2011). This form of transformative experience is central to the third and final analytic that I will discuss next.

**IV (Re)framing experience**

The third analytic is concerned with the potential of socially engaged art to (re)frame a particular sphere of experience in order to move beyond the limits of the present and enable participants to act on other possibilities for being. However, as I illustrate in this section, when included in planning practices, socially engaged art risks ending up as a form of ‘participatory alibi’ simply aiming to help people accept the planning process, rather than offering a transformative experience that helps them question and challenge it. The (re)framing of a particular sphere of experience is important to enable the critical questioning that may lead to transformative insights in this regard. Foucault’s notion of experience is helpful to understanding how socially engaged art may enable this form of critical activity.

Foucault conceives of experience as a multi-layered concept that articulates forms of knowledge, mechanisms of power and relations to the self. The link between experience and critical activity is here put to the fore:

The experience through which we grasp the intelligibility of certain mechanisms (for example, imprisonment, punishment, and so on) and the way in which we are enabled to detach ourselves from them by perceiving them differently will be, at best, one and the same thing (Foucault, 2000, cited in Lemke, 2011: 29).

Critical activity is not understood as a negative practice that necessitates the determination of rational standards of evaluation and the application of these standards to social reality. Rather, Foucault suggests a more positive activity that problematizes the way we think about and judge certain objects in order to distance ourselves from their naturalness or self-evidence, and to work towards new experiences. These forms of experience are always a fiction since they are things one fabricates oneself, and thus didn’t exist before but will exist after the experience. Hence, they have the potential to move us beyond the limits of the present. Critique, then, is accordingly seen as an instrument or a means to achieve something that does not yet exist: the promise of a better future (Lemke, 2011: 30).

Socially engaged art may play a crucial part in enabling these forms of experience as art has ‘the function of wrenching the subject from itself’ (Foucault, 2000: 241, cited in Lemke, 2011: 36). As Marcuse observes, art ‘is committed to that perception of the world which alienates individuals from their functional existence and performance in society’ (1978: 9). This break with everyday habits and routines may have the result that, as Cameron and 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). The transformative experience facilitated through socially engaged art, then, may enable the formation of new subjectivities that may be constituted in disobedience to the principles by which a person one is formed. These shifts in identification are encouraged by socially engaged art’s focus on imagination, creativity and meaning making through positive affective and emotional registers. According to Thompson (2009), the attention to ‘affect’, defined as bodily responses, sensations and aesthetic pleasure, expands the participants’ capacity to act, engage and connect. Affect is here seen to intensify experience in a way that can both protect and draw the participants into the world around them, without insisting on the terms of that engagement.

However, this specific attention to affect as an open and yet engaging form of experience risks being compromised when socially engaged art is employed in for example urban planning practices. Socially engaged art is here mobilized with quite specific aims and outcomes in mind, for example in terms of integrating local values and expertise in urban projects. This aim is often criticized as being a simple ‘tick-the-box’ exercise that is nothing more than a ritual to satisfy legal requirements concerning public involvement (Innes and Booher, 2000). The aim with this exercise is not necessarily to ‘free’ subjects from their functional existence in society, but rather to ‘access’ this functional existence. This is illustrated in the understanding of the knowledge that is produced through these exercises. Knowledge is here seen as a collective ‘knowing from within’ (Shotter 1993), developed in intimate familiarity and social interaction both with the situation at hand and with those who participate in that situation (Yanow 2004). As such, local knowledge is easily accessible to locals but considered difficult for outside experts to ‘capture’ (van Herzele and van Woerkum 2008). Knowledge is here seen as a form of transmission whereby there is something on the one side, in one mind or body that must be transferred to another mind or body. As Rancière (2009) points out, a spectator/actor relationship is here established between the ‘local knowers’ and the researcher/planner. Rancière critiques the negative connotations of spectatorship that may be implied by this relation, specifically regarding the spectator’s role as either passive or active by virtue of the knowing performer.

In order to (re)frame the sphere of experience, socially engaged art needs to enhance a conception of knowledge as something performative, made intersubjectively within particular sets of social relations, times and places (Jupp, 2007; Pain, 2004; van Herzele and van Woerkum, 2008). The urban planner Leonie Sandercock accordingly outlines an ‘epistemology of multiplicity’ (2003: 2) that acknowledges the many ways of knowing and doing that exist in addition to the instrumental, scientific and technical ways of knowing that prevail in planning theory. As already mentioned, the focus on multiplicity is by no means a panacea as it runs the risk of impeding any sustained critique by rendering space and society unrepresentable. At the same time, as Jupp (2007: 2837) points out, recognizing multiplicity is important in order to question and undermine the assumption that there are distinct realms of knowledge that exist prior to any form of public involvement.

Hence, Sandercock emphasises the dialogue between planners and communities of interests. By paying attention to each other’s stories, one may move forward to a situation of mutual learning through an equal empowerment that validates and respects each other’s knowledge. As Rancière argues, aesthetic experience is shared by all, regardless of their individual skills, dispositions and education (Dikeç, 2012). Accordingly, socially engaged art may facilitate what Rancière (2007) calls an ‘equality of knowledge’ that blurs the opposition between knowledge and ignorance, activity and passivity, spectator and actor, by acknowledging that there are neither facts nor interpretations, only different ways of telling stories. This requires ‘spectators who are active as interpreters, who render their own translation, who appropriate the story for themselves, and who ultimately make their own story out of it’ (Rancière, 2007: 280). However, in order to avoid falling into the trap of relativism, it is important to see these stories as partial and situated in the material, social and political conditions in which they are produced. Relativism suggests that knowledge has no foundation other than personal and individual interpretations and therefore ‘true knowledge’ is relative. Haraway situates relativism as ‘the perfect mirror twin of totalization’ (1988: 584), claiming that by promising a vision from everywhere (relativism) and nowhere (totalization) equally and fully, you deny responsibility and critical inquiry. Hence, Haraway advocates the concept of ‘situated knowledges’, which emphasizes embodiment and partiality as the conditions under which knowledge is acquired.

This approach encourages careful negotiation of, and reflection on, the subtle power relations that exist in socially engaged art (Charnley 2011). To (re)frame experience is here not a process of making a ‘free’ space that increases the participants’ ability to act unencumbered by the restrictions imposed by external forces. It is instead a process of recognising the direct and felt responsibility of engaging and being with others. Accordingly, socially engaged art may facilitate critical activity as a mode of self-formation that suspends as far as possible the normative system which one refers to in order to test and evaluate it (Lemke 2011).

**Conclusion**

In this paper I haveexamined the political potential of socially engaged art through three analytics addressing the (re)configuring, (re)framing and (re)thinking of specific spaces, concerns and experiences in relation to the urban environment. By applying a neo-Marxist approach to these three analytics, I have combined critical ideas about the social construction of art with perspectives taken from critical urban studies such as the power and politics of producing (urban) space. The value of this analysis is that it problematises the idea of socially engaged art as an inherently liberatory space that exists ‘outside’ of present conditions and from which change and critique can be articulated.

As I have illustrated, the political potential of socially engaged art, then, lies not in the attempt to resist or escape the present through a break with everyday activities and subjectivities, and neither is it inherently latent in the art form itself. Rather, it lies in its attempt to seek out and promote the idea of urban society as a ‘virtual object’ – a horizon towards which we can move and a possible way of living together. By foregrounding the virtual aspects of urban space, socially engaged art may expand our understanding of the link between the material environment and the production of urban imaginaries and meanings. Accordingly, socially engaged art may foreground the transmutability of things, training city residents to search for alternatives within the present – to take apart the urban environment and combine or rearrange elements to form new social and material possibilities.

By foregrounding how socially engaged art is inevitably linked to present structures and systems, the three analytics discussed here have revealed the often-suppressed contradictions within artistic as well as urban processes. Further research into the political potential of socially engaged art could benefit from positioning contradiction as a fruitful starting point for, rather than a negation of, this artform. Questions that need to be addressed in this regard are: how can this starting point move research and practice beyond the opposition of contraries such as outside/inside, and make explicit how socially engaged art can be productive of existing material and institutional conditions and at the same time articulate alternatives through participation in them? How can contradiction be used as an analytical tool that enables a close empirical investigation of socially engaged art and the dynamics of its entanglements with its social and material site? And, how might this approach help develop an approach to socially engaged art that is attuned not only to local specificities and contingencies, but also to broader, intercontextual dynamics, trajectories and struggles?

While Geography is well suited to respond to these questions, modern conceptions of art as a separate ‘sphere’ located mainly in the gallery or public square still lingers in geography (Hawkins 2013). Socially engaged art challenges these normative conventions of existing art criticism and thus calls for a transdisciplinary approach that subjects its own explanatory apparatus to continual re-evaluation and reconstitution in light of the ongoing trends, contradictions and struggles associated with its contemporary forms. Hence, as this paper has illustrated, to further scrutinize the political potential of socially engaged art, research and practice in the field need to move debates away from the stalemate produced by binaries as well as false clarity and simplicity, and rather shift attention to how productive change can be brought about through the conflictual, ambivalent and inter-subjective space of socially engaged art.

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