



Jeanne van Heeswijk & Afrikaanderwijk Cooperative, Freehouse, Radicalizing the Local, legislative map. Photo: Tom Janssen.

MA TRANS - Art, education, engagement

PREPARING FOR THE “NOT-YET”

← [Back to summary](#)

20 November 2023 by [Jeanne van Heeswijk](#)

TEXT

“The right to the city is [...] far more than a right of individual or group access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change and reinvent the city more after our hearts’ desire.”¹ (David Harvey)

For me, agency is about how we can act upon our desire to have a better life.

“Right to the city” proponent David Harvey emphasizes that when he uses the term “heart’s desire,” he is referring not only to an individual undertaking, but also to a collective one. How can we move towards a shared desire of how we would like to live? How do we act in order to better our own life or situation, while also serving a collective understanding? These are questions that need to be addressed in every living environment – within the city as well as beyond it.

Lately, I talk a lot about “training for the not-yet,” or “re-enacting the not-yet.” How can people feel that they can have agency as a collective body and act upon that when they don’t know the collective body yet? It is a process of becoming, a balancing act between individual and the collective needs. If we think of agency only as a collective undertaking, then we forget the step of how two or more people actually become a collective.

What is critical to that is being able to let go of some of your own subjectivity, to put your subjectivity at risk. Or at least to temporarily extend your own subjectivity in order to approach other kinds of agencies and look at the space that is in between, in order to find a common ground with another person.

And that piece is especially important in situations composed of non-homogeneous groups. How do you build a collective understanding of a territory when territories are fractured? How do you immerse yourself in something you don’t know? That too requires taking risks. At the same time there also needs to be a discussion about who is able and/or can afford to take this risk. Can we create enough safe space for people to take risks in relation to others?

There is a recent article by Spanish philosopher Marina Garcés, in which she gives a nice description of what it means to let go of your subjectivity. She talks about learning to listen, breaking something of yourself to code yourself with new alliances; but also allowing the dual, conflictive, nature of reality to become part of yourself. She doesn’t use the word subjectivity, but she writes about being “affective,” which in essence is to be sensitive to the way the other is in relation to you. She calls this “honesty with the real.”

What Garcés describes is not just a mental exercise, and it doesn’t necessarily happen through words. It is an embodied experience of relationship. It requires a willingness to listen. Not only hearing what the other has to say, but becoming sensitive to how someone else is. We learn that by sharing notions of how we see ourselves where we are. It can be through food, just by eating together. Or by spending time in each other’s places to understand how somebody creates space or well-being. What is important in that learning process is “allowing” for one’s own ideas and even ideas to be withheld momentarily, in order to understand what might emerge from the fact that all these differences are there together.

This is an exercise that we are just beginning to learn. Most of us are bad at just allowing for things to emerge, because we are so ingrained in the capitalist productivist system that we don’t know how to withhold, how not to produce reactions, a surplus of objects and ideas. Withholding is not about becoming passive. In fact, it is very active, and also can be very creative, because it is reassembling oneself in relation to others or through others.

In that sense, it is important to think about the collective as an activity. To approach the notion of collectives not as a pre-existing social structure but as actively becoming in context. So that becoming a collective is an acting towards it, a coming together and dissolving and recomposing. It is a balancing act between making emergent and re-rooting. This is what I call “working the ground,” and agency is like that: making your individual agency strong, while at the same time being willing to break it in order to reconnect anew. “How can I make things emergent, while re-rooting them, radicalizing them in a different way?”

So training for the not-yet is a relational, dialogical, discursive process, and a frictional process as well.

It is a field of tension where new senses of belonging are created, and it is also where the communal lies: in working and re-working the territory together in order to understand what it takes to make things grow, to make things connect. This constantly working at it is what we need. It is collectively trying to become while not already identifying what can be. That is something that we need to learn how to practice. Letting go of our own subjectivity or breaking something of ourselves to allow other things to connect to us. It is a collective learning process in which we all have to let go of some of our ideas and our ideals in order to understand what it is that WE need.

All of this is about growing, but, again, not about 'growth' in the capitalist logic of accumulative continuity. It is very important to think about growing without necessarily having a point on the horizon. That means that we also have to postpone the idea of 'success,' that there is a point where everything will be alright. (This idea also belongs to the logic of continuous, linear growth.) That is what I mean by the "not-yet." How can we practice the collective without seeing that as aiming toward a fixed point in the future?

Consciously or unconsciously, we all embody aspects of the neoliberal framework. We are not outside. We are inside. And we have to unlearn some of the things we are used to, which is very hard to do. In order to begin, we must be willing and able to break parts of ourselves, to have room for new ways of being. It goes back to the idea of becoming active in the understanding of collective undertaking, in ways that enable all of us to move from being passive consumers to active producers of our everyday condition. I believe that the local is the scale at which this is possible, where we might be able to understand new social, political and economic relationships. It is an open public arena where you meet the other, smell the other, taste the other. Where you are able to confront the other through actively engaging in presenting, discussing, and demonstrating, in the sense of making visible and tangible what you can bring to that arena. It is a space in which you perform yourself and your understanding of the world. It is acted out, it is performed, it is played, it is fought over sometimes. It is a field of tension in which people actively exercise their understanding of what it means to live together.

That's how I see the "local": not as a specific place, but as a condition that embodies global conflicts site-specifically. So if I talk about working at "local" conditions, I talk about a condition that needs knowledge of place. And knowledge of place or knowledge of the local condition is not necessarily bound to people living there, but also includes people working there or having a relationship to it or a vested interest in it. In my work, I approach a place or an area as someone who has a vested interest in the specific "local" condition because it raises questions about me as a citizen or a person in the world.

Importantly, when I talk about myself as a citizen, I am referring to new forms of citizenship that can be made. To be a citizen may sound nice in theory, but with all kinds of different value systems at work, establishing an active connection to the public sphere is not easy. Many people do not have any idea about how many of the processes that affect their daily lives are constructed, and that makes them feel disconnected. Finding a point of entry and connecting to the processes that shape your daily environment is very important, because it creates the possibility of becoming an active co-producer of those processes. This requires an embodied understanding of the complexity of what is at play in a certain situation, and figuring out how to enter it. We must learn

about how the place where we are is forced upon us in its being, how the powers that be determine our lives, and how we can keep agency in that, and bring our own idea of a relationship. As Marina Garcés states: “Exposing oneself and getting involved are ways of assaulting the reality that the democratic channels of participation and freedom of choice are constantly neutralising in all spheres of life in our societies.”²

So, in my opinion, contrary to how we have been programmed, an active citizen is not somebody who just votes, but somebody who actively takes part in the way in which their daily environment is formed, governed, and financed. That is an essential right, and people should be encouraged to take back that right and say “We can be in charge.”

Again, I believe that the local is the scale on which this is possible. It is a scale that is manageable for an individual or a community, but that also can include larger, global conflicts. We need to look carefully at how these processes of building collective agency work on the scale of the local, and then, from there, think about how we can weave or “net” them together, creating a web of smaller, local entities that is strong enough to resist. What are the acts of resistance and the acts of resilience in our living environments? Where are they located? (Quite often they are located on a small scale; for instance, they start in somebody’s house.) How can we net them together around their atmosphere of resilience? We should think of these as steps, which might not make sense yet, but that may have the potential to inform larger unity. That is another part of what I mean when we talk about “preparing for the not-yet.” If we can all practice these skill sets on a local scale, then we train ourselves for bigger struggles as well.

So I believe that these small, local forms of resistance could be practiced everywhere, and then at the moment when it is needed, they should also work as a netted cell system by sharing knowledge and sharing skills. Co-creating the social is a more complex thing than just creating forms for people to get together. But, what is the “social”? I believe that the social is a human condition, and it is a spatial-relational condition: it is about how we are together in space. We have to be committed to understanding the narratives through which this condition is shaped.

The creative practitioner has an important role in re-imagining spaces and scenarios for living together.

It is clear that we need better spaces, whether they are reconstructed or built anew. However, it is not about simply building them, but how we can collectively create them and care for them. This process does not have a clear roadmap, nor a linear trajectory. As such, the practice is not a series of projects or a series of interventions. It is actually an attitude and it has to become embodied through the practice of the not-yet.

I do think that artistic or aesthetic skill sets can create imagery that is capable of capturing some of the things that are going on. At the same time, it is very important that we, as creative practitioners, question and challenge the ways in which we create this imagery. Within our practice, we do talk about commoning, but still somewhere we have this urge to create ourselves autonomously or give form to ourselves. So we need to have a critical eye for this, while seeking to deeply understand what it is that we have in common. What do we do in common? What could it be that will actually hold us together? I think we don’t know, and it is presumptuous to insert ideas

about what that common should hold. That would almost be a colonial approach; that we already know what it should look like and how people should behave within it. We need to move towards the common in order to understand it.

If as creative practitioners we believe that we are the creators who are negotiating “on behalf” of others, then that negotiation is a space of translation, rather than a true space of presenting, confronting, and acting towards a collective desire.

I find it problematic when the creative practitioner becomes the translator in negotiation processes with the power structures. So we need to think about how to break the artistic persona into a multiplicity of being as well, to unlearn the ways of inserting our skills, in order to ensure that people don't just become service “users” of another kind, but rather that they are part of the building process, and thereby become true co-creators .

This is about learning collectively how to take and share responsibility. To think and act beyond one's own immediate needs, assumptions or desires, and to be very conscious of when and where we are being privileged in relation to others. Artists have to start considering this, instead of just carving out a nice position for themselves. We need to take into account the place where we are and all the elements that define it and that are influenced by our being there. It is fine if our presence contributes to things getting better, but if it leads to displacement of others, then it is a big problem. That is also an interesting point to consider in relation to how capitalist thinking urges us to become linear subjects who are here to fulfill ourselves. How can we break that desire, that individual desire, in order to find a collective desire?

So when artists and designers engage in these processes, it is very important that they self-scrutinize their movements, and also to look at the various terminologies at work. For example, the recent term “creative city,” which sounds nice but is actually a strategy that is used to gentrify large areas of our cities. In fact, I would not speak of gentrification, but rather of cleansification by which areas are cleaned or cleansed of any unwanted conflicts. So they are prevented from coming into a situation where things become “frictious.” In the Netherlands, the city planning vocabulary for this is “*schoon, heel en veilig*,” which means “clean, whole and safe.” This means that the ones in power do not want anything “messy.” They think that if we were to play out our

desires collectively in a more frictional way, the outcome might be something they cannot anticipate or control. This is why so many of our public spaces are over-regulated today, covered by a dense net of invisible policies and regulations – and sometimes very visible forms of control, such as policing – that are intended to ‘calm down’ the territory. It is an interesting contradiction that local governments talk about the “creative city” and then want contemporary spaces that are completely singular, and linear; that are easy to understand and to control. It contradicts what, for me, creativity really means.

Creativity to me belongs to that realm of “*cultivare*,” to bring into culture. Working the ground to create an understanding of how things grow and can flourish. It is something through which everyone can give form to their own identity, can contribute or demonstrate something to an area. And that is the basis from which new forms of space can be created. It is a laborious process that takes energy, skills and dedication, but it is not something that needs to be controlled. And it is not the exclusive job of a trained practitioner.

So, people from creative fields need to be extremely mindful of their position and also of their point of entry. It is not a problem to want to serve a certain situation, as long as you question and try to understand that situation as fully as possible, and constantly interrogate yourself, your intentions and your actions, because it is easy to become instrumentalized.

Being aware of your point of entry means that before you accept an invitation to insert your practice in any given context, you first look critically at that invitation: who is asking, what is the motivation behind it, and who or what is to be served?

I don’t mind being an instrument if it’s one that makes the right to produce our daily environment a possibility, and that works on self-organization, collective ownership, and new forms of sociability. An instrument that enables all of us to occupy the place we live in.

It is also very important to remember that if we actively want to engage with people in local situations in which they do take ownership or create a different sense of belonging, then we have to understand that the outcome may be different than the one we have in mind. We have to let go of some of our own ideas of what that may look like. I am very fortunate that I have people around

me that scrutinize me on a daily basis, questioning me about my understanding of a given situation, or about my reason for being there. This makes me mindful of my own understanding of value systems, and of my own desire for one value system to prevail over another. I have to accept that these processes will not necessarily lead to an affirmation of my own ideas, but will have to lead to something where all of us can have a place in it.

Perhaps we have to learn how to break an invitation in order to extend it to the unknown.

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Notes

1. David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, London and New York: Verso, 2013, p. 4. ↩
2. Marina Garcés, "Honesty with the Real," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* vol. 4, no. 1, 2012, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/jac.v4i0.18820> (last accessed 16 October 2023) ↩

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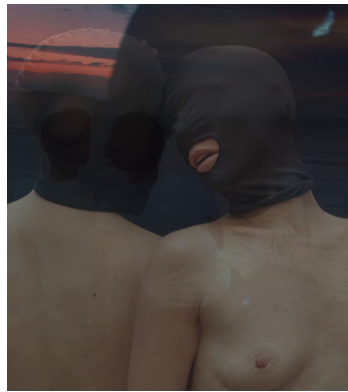


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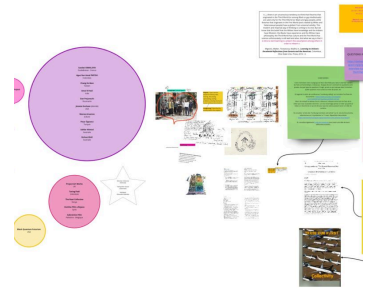


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