

What communication designers can learn from participatory artistic fieldwork.

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Abstract

St Lukas University College is uniquely located in Brussels. It is situated in the political heart of Europe, and more specifically in Schaerbeek, a very colourful neighbourhood standing in sharp contrast with the European district nearby. As college coaches, we focus on intercultural and interdisciplinary discovery and learning as the main driving forces for social understanding. In 2009 we initiated NEXTDOOR, a platform to explore and stimulate, in an educational context, the social engagement with and intercultural participation in the multi-ethnic urban society of the Brussels Brabantwijk (Kint, Tomico & Ferwerda, 2011). Workshops and lectures focus on social integration issues in this area, located near the Brussels North Station.

This paper argues for a more experience-based interaction, with the design of a visual narrative influenced by an artistic concept and participatory interaction developed in a specific local context. The paper explores the way approach and societal experience of an artist working in an intercultural neighbourhood as his specific artistic habitat can stimulate and trigger designers focused on visual communication and narration. It elaborates on the concept of public space and its social implication.

In addition it discusses how designers can be inspired by cultural values obtained through the process of neighbourhood participation under artistic guidance and how they can translate these values and qualities in the design of culturally identified communication systems for an intercultural context.

KEYWORDS: intercultural encounters, experience-based interaction, participatory artistic fieldwork, empathy

Introduction

The Brabantwijk, location of St Lukas University College, lies to the north of the city of Brussels. According to Brabantwijk specialist Tim Cassiers, researcher at Cosmopolis Free University of Brussels (VUB) and Earth and Environmental Sciences at the Catholic University of Leuven (KUL), it is a highly neglected neighbourhood and one of the poorer areas of Brussels. A multitude of groups and functions are concentrated here. The population is mainly Turkish and Moroccan in origin, but also many newcomers find their first residency here such as Roma gypsies and people from the Balkan area. These people live together in this poor area of transition. They tend to stick to their (small) community, often without making an effort to communicate or integrate with other people in the neighbourhood. The area has a high population turnover.

Aside from the residential function, the area also has a number of supra-local functions, such as ethnic trade and window prostitution, besides colleges and offices. Not until the late nineties did this area become an item on the political agenda. After years of depravation the required budget was available to renovate the public space. But this didn't solve all the problems in the area. The social problems remain considerable: educational disadvantages, unemployment, poverty haven't disappeared, no more than social cohesion has become a fact. Therefore it is, according to Cassiers, necessary to invest in this area. He mentions: "The area has a multitude of functions (shopping, schooling, living, leisure, prostitution, working...) that capture flows from a multitude of scales and is therefore used by a huge variety of people. All these persons (groups or individuals) have their own, proper way of living, using, exploring or just passing through the neighbourhood, their own agendas and time schedules, their own interests and passions as well as fears and prejudices". (Kint et al., 2011, p. 61).

Intercultural learning and discovering

NEXTDOOR was initiated as a platform to bridge the gap between people in an urban context and, more specifically, between people of different cultural backgrounds. Different cultures in this area have "difficulty" to live, work or talk together. Language – spoken, visual or just simple physical behaviour - is often different and even more often misunderstood in this area. We want to open the mind of our young artists and designers. We believe that by confronting them with their personal convictions will improve their social conscience even as they design for and interact with a specific social group. Experience, empathy and participation are keywords to our projects. (Koskinen et al., 2003).

In 2009 we initiated NEXTDOOR/QUARTIER, a cross-cultural pilot project with students from the Technische Universiteit Eindhoven (Kint et al., 2011). This project gave the students of communication design from St Lukas and industrial design from Eindhoven the opportunity to experience the societal relevance of their research by working in this very specific location. The students worked by means of different iterations such as a mix of user research, communication strategies and interaction prototypes. Their research method was strongly based on active participation fieldwork as a way of reflective practice: experiences of participation intervened with their design processes and decisions. The students looked for street life in this "transit" neighbourhood. They had to dive into the implications of dealing with cultural differences, knowing that their decisions would have an impact and couldn't be reversed.

Confronting young designers with their own beliefs as individuals improves their social awareness and responsibility while, at the same time, enabling them to create a design for a specific social group. Involving the urban environment of the Brussels North era proved to be key to the development of this project. The active participation in this specific neighbourhood worked as a catalyst to create synergies between content and context. The results of the project were delivered in the form of experiential prototypes, which were publicly displayed in the Brussels neighbourhood. They showed the importance of learning by doing as the main driving force for social understanding.

Intercultural Encounters

Adopting a different approach from previous NEXTDOOR projects, this time we invited the Dutch artist Bart Lodewijks, who lives in Ghent, to coach “Intercultural Encounters”. Bart Lodewijks uses public space as his canvas for drawing chalk linear traces. Being dependent on the participatory goodwill of the locals from the neighbourhood where he wants to leave his chalk traces behind, he involves them already from the very start in his artistic process. He develops a new language. His language is universal: it moves the human as a social cultural being and therefore also is relevant for design students.

In his “Unforgettable Neighbourhood. Proposal for Permanent Chalk Drawings in the Moscou District of Ghent”, he wrote: “I don’t know if the residents wondered what the drawings represented or what they referred to – they didn’t ask anything. All the same, instead of excluding me as a stranger, they showed a measure of generosity. Sometimes I suspected that they allowed me to go about my project out of nonchalance, as if it didn’t matter to them what the fronts of their houses looked like. As I saw it, the drawings were like immigrants who fit in and at the same time remained themselves. They didn’t belong to the neighbourhood but they did become a part of it. As the drawings folded themselves around the architecture and the brickwork of the houses, they began to play a role in the social life of the neighbourhood.” (Lodewijks, 2010, p. 55)

“Intercultural Encounters” took the form of a one-week workshop. The American sociologist Louis Wirth defined the city as a place where very different people can live together on a small surface (Soenen, 2006). With Bart Lodewijks, we agreed that the design interaction of our visual communication students was to be the outcome of small social encounters with people from this Brussels district, and especially of everyday, loose contacts. How to meet and attract the attention of these very divergent people? How to learn to closely observe this socially complex neighbourhood and participate to it by way of small talks and little encounters? The Brabantwijk as much attracts by its exoticism of Turkish and North African oriented shops and restaurants, as it disturbs in its differentiation. We also asked our students to use the public space outside the university campus as their own particular working field. By letting their personal space interfere with public space, and the other way around, their artistic research will start to be [come] connected to the rich and layered social and ethnic neighbourhood that encloses the walls of our educational environment and beyond.



Figure 1: Street view of the college in the Brussels Brabantwijk standing in sharp contrast with a Turkish shop nearby (photography by Inge Ferwerda).

As becomes clear from figure 1, the new building of the University College is all solid, grey and concrete. It is an intellectual artistic residence for dominantly white art students, artists and educational researchers. How can it become a “transit zone” of knowledge and interaction with other cultures, and eventually a counterweight to the thinking of a society that politically and ideologically is outspokenly right winged? By showing the students the door to the exterior, we want to remove and obliterate the school context albeit temporarily. In these circumstances an experience of disorientation and reorientation becomes operative. The student should appropriate this “zone of frustration” and “full of question marks” and learn to convert this experience into an artistic source of inspiration. This issue is important to prevent artistic withdrawal and segregation within the artistic processes students develop during their education.

The period of preparatory artistic work, developed by Lodewijks in the Brabantwijk, was followed by a lecture to introduce him to the students and make them familiar with his specific working method in public space. He shared his experiences of working in “problem zones”, such as Moscou, Ghent, and other countries. During the workshop following the lecture, he guided the students to the places that are relevant for him as an artist working in this area. He asked them to “reactivate” these places and to make possible entries out of them to meet their very individual process development. He urged them to participate with their artistic process as a starting point in the social activities of the neighbourhood and become guests in the public space they now only experience hastily and without interest every day. He triggered them to enlarge their empathic feeling to become ready to give up a portion of the autonomy of their personal artistic work. In this situation, he believes, we can stimulate the students to develop an artistic practice that matters for society by not staying outside it.

Intercultural Encounters: cases

Under the guidance of Bart Lodewijks five young master students (re) discovered the Brabantwijk. We also invited Werner de Jonge, University College neighbourhood worker Brabantwijk/ Bouge, to give them a guided tour in the area, tracing its history from present to past situation. They roamed around the area with the specific purpose to leave “their” traces behind. To make them familiar with this uncommon and not so comfortable

exploration of a real place outside their comfort zone, Bart Lodewijks asked them to tease and provoke a hello from an unknown neighbour.

His approach is very similar to the anthropological approach Ruth Soenen developed in a specific area of the city of Antwerp (Soenen, 2006). As a researcher she investigated how small encounters between people who do not know each other might still have a strong social impact. They make people feel at home. They give a temporary feeling of community. During these short encounters, small talks or short conversations play an important role. According to Soenen, small social contacts between citizens on daily basis are not banal. They are very important for the frame of mind and social cohesion in the city (Soenen, 2006). She discovered a "light" version of community development as an alternative to the strong feeling of solidarity and engagement. People feel good at places where they can get into contact with other people or indeed can choose not to. "Ambivalent places", as she calls them, are places where you can choose to be anonymous, or not. In these places you can "play" with different roles and contacts. Take the tram. This is a kind of in-between space where you either manifest your social position and ethnicity or not. Her open viewpoint gave way to rich, nuanced and multi coloured insights. Her study, among others, resulted in advising the Belgian government to rearrange the public spaces.

From their first encounter with the neighbourhood, the students proceeded in their own way under the close guidance of Bart Lodewijks who continuously offered feedback on their progress and stimulated them to overcome their hesitations and initial uneasiness. They were: Silvia Bakker, artist, Jana Bekaert, Lien Larosse, Olivier Van Gierdeghom and Tanguy De Muynck, students in visual communication.

Tanguy focused on the absence of the college in the debate around social cohesion. During the tour, it became clear that especially the Turkish community is prominently present in this area. It counts many shops, barbers, teahouses, restaurants, halal butchers etcetera. Tanguy focused on this community. How to connect it positively to St Lukas, without focusing on problems of seclusion and other negative situations? How to improve the integration of the college in the neighbourhood? He first developed the idea to greet the Turkish community by way of a written message on the façade of the building. Another focus was the college cafeteria and the fact that you can reach it from the street. Why allow only students and staff members to this cafeteria? Why not remould it into a semi public space and give it a social function in the neighbourhood? In what way can St Lukas contribute culturally to the saying that "love passes through the stomach"? Tanguy looked for a way to give shape to a menu card, using the typical and easily recognizable visual communication of Turkish restaurants (see figure 2). He established and enhanced a dialogue between Turkish and Belgian culture by way of a playful visual interaction between what one expects (Turkish kebab and others) and what one actually gets when entering the place (Belgian food). Never forget that Brussels also is the city of René Magritte and the surrealists...



Figure 2: Examples of Turkish menus, addressing the Brabantwijk customer (left). The visual communication, for promoting Turkish food, has been translated to Belgian cuisine (right) (photography by Tanguy).

Lien was attracted to the amount of objects thrown away on the street. She found spoons, sunglasses, a lamp, a key, and even a teapot. She wanted to work with this cradle. First she played with the repositioning of objects in the street (see figure 3), turning boxes 90 degrees to force the pedestrian to walk in a different way to avoid them. Next step to this small, innocent interaction was to break the anonymity and indifference to caring and seeing. What if these objects took on a new identity? She decided upon picking up discarded objects from the street, bringing them home, cleaning them up, restoring them and making them attractive again. Finally she packed them as into little presents and gave them a second life in the neighbourhood, by putting them back in the same spot where she found them (see figure 4). The drawings accompanying the object were included in the box and explained her story to the stranger that would find her present and open it (see figure 5). Lien established a network between herself and the other, with the wrapped object as a go-between. She developed a mini-version of a social network. The attention of receiving a small present from an anonymous person resulted in a postcard for a neighbourhood action on changing and exchanging functional objects (see figure 8).



Figure 3: Action and reaction or movement by repositioning boxes left in the street (photography by Lien).



Figure 4: Found and damaged objects, such as a teapot, have been restored at home and packed as a little gift (photography by Lien).

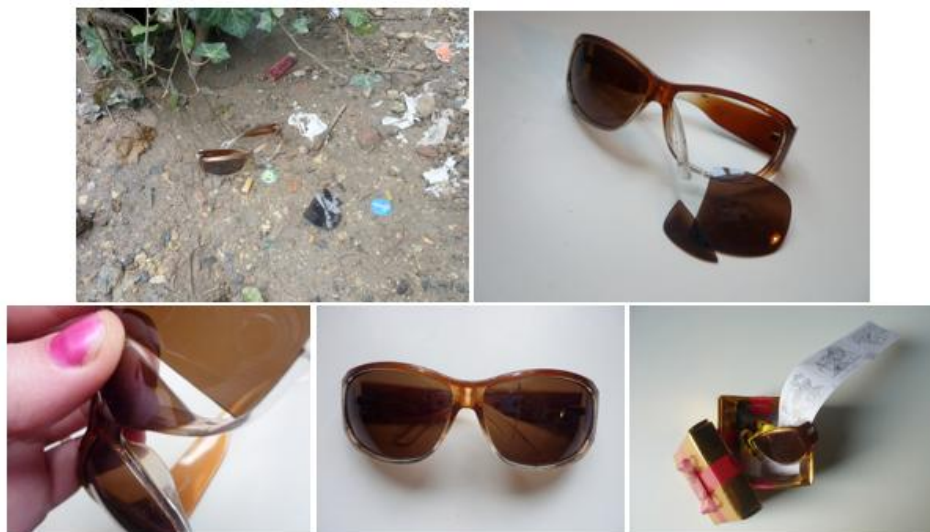


Figure 5: Broken and thrown away sunglasses, restored at home and packed as a little gift (photography by Lien).

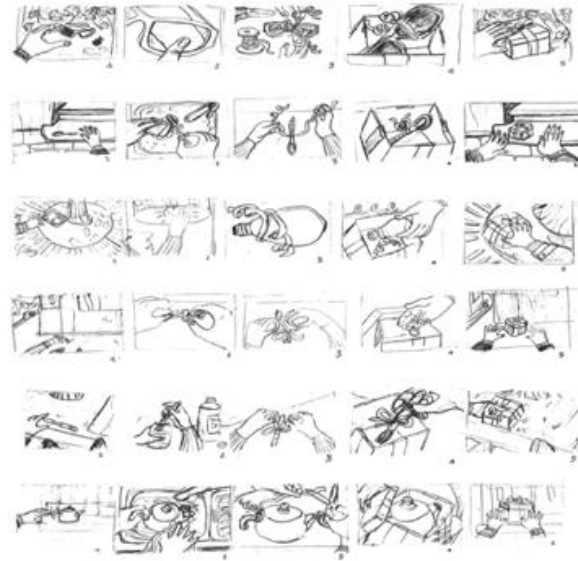


Figure 6: “ Objects for and from the street/ objet perdu & trouvé”. Each object Lien found at street is accompanied by a little drawing to make the attention personal and communicate its whereabouts (photography by Lien).

Olivier was fascinated by the discovery of a huge amount of kitsch ornaments all over the place, wherever you look around you in the streets. Many shops in the Brabantwijk also sell carpets with decorative patterns from Arabian countries. Because of our fascination for the exotic we often forget that the Flemish city of Bruges, where Olivier lives, also shares with Brussels a rich (and historical) tradition in lace, cloth and tapestry. Olivier looked for a pattern he could use during this workshop. He printed it on small sized square stickers as a mosaic. From a distance his mosaics look exotic and familiar to the neighbourhood. Coming closer one recognizes the patterns of Bruges lace. He used these stickers to decorate house facades and create house numbers (see figure 7). Passengers-by found it “jolie”, or good looking. This small operation, he mentions, might eventually give a creative boost to the neighbourhood and is, moreover, an easy way to learn to re-appreciate our Flemish tradition.



Figure 7: Inspired by the Bruges lace, Olivier developed stickers accompanying the existing mosaics and adding to the embellishment of the Brabantwijk (photography by Olivier).

One student did not get further than a short talk. Jana wanted to come closer to the prostitution district that gives the Brabantwijk its negative reputation. When she finally found the courage to enter a bar, she met an older woman, called Jacky (see figure 8). She visited her and offered a little mint to break the ice. Jana made a full booklet narrative of this informal encounter. It changed her perception of sex workers and made her see them as social workers as well.

Lien, on the other hand, elaborated her small encounters with strangers by way of discarded objects into a neighbourhood action, called "From me to you". She cultivated a "Cradle to Cradle" lifecycle by giving unwanted objects a second life and meaning and thus bringing people closer through sharing and caring. The sticker on the left of her colourful poster (see figure 9) visualizes the core of her action: it is about a small gesture from someone to someone else. During her design interaction Lien discovered and put into practice the social qualities of small talk and "ambivalent setting". She definitely understood that people feel good at places where they are only partly recognisable and remain partly anonymous and where they try out intercultural relations without any obligations. This situation gave rise to "light community development", i.e. the possibility to meet people she normally would never meet.



Figure 8: Jacky's habitat (photography by Jana).



Figure 9: Neighbourhood action with thrown away objects (photography by Lien).

Dialogue of art and design in education: conclusion

With NEXTDOOR we want to stimulate an open attitude within our educational system and embrace what is alien or happens and stands outside ourselves. The research questions involved in our projects are the following: how can research through design and art be used as a tool for social cohesion? How to confront young designers and artists with an active appreciation and tolerance towards other cultures? How to sensitize them to this new socio-cultural context and content as a counterweight to Western xenophobic thinking? How to make them aware of the fact that design and art are not value-neutral but have an important ethical impact upon society? Culture continuously evolves and cannot be contained. This project focuses on the emergent behaviour in communities, emergent cultures. It is not about preserving. It is about making culture. It is about supporting the new, the situation as it is and not as it was. It is about creating value and how it relates to the cultural value of the intervention. The aim is to develop sustainable and meaningful interaction points for an active dialogue and collaboration and to define the steps in-between. We work by means of different iterations, as a mix of communication strategies and interaction prototypes. Our research method is strongly based on participatory fieldwork as a way of reflective practice. We look for street life and street culture in this "transit" neighbourhood. A big issue is the living experience or participation and interaction. In what way do these experiences of participating and interacting interfere with communication processes and decisions?

Students participating in Intercultural Encounters were asked to leave the private space behind and deal with the public space. This seemed to be a big step for 3 out of the 5 participants who daily travel from and to cities with high uncertainty avoidance. The Brabantwijk looks very unstructured and unattractive to them. It is ugly and dirty. It is difficult to integrate in this community. The people of this neighbourhood speak many and different languages. They have other values, habits and ways to deal with life. The student integration to this neighbourhood is mostly restricted to occasional shopping. By inviting them to small talk with strangers outside their comfort zone, Bart Lodewijks introduced and

guided them to the ambivalent setting of the neighbourhood as the starting point for their design interactions. These playful and empathic interactions, worked out under his practice focused guidance, might eventually prepare them for the challenge of cultural integration that they will be involved in once they enter the professional field of design and art.

Design has its roots in artistic expression, hands-on practice and in the rethinking of the existing. But, is it art? Kees Dorst briefly reflected on this question in his book "Understanding design" (Dorst, 2006: 25). He correctly mentions that art education in the western world is focused on the personal development and the ability of the student to generate and pursue interesting goals. In design, on the contrary, goals are partly determined by stakeholders, because the things a designer creates have to fulfil some practical purposes. Artists do not aim for practical applications. They have the freedom to decide upon their goals. With their creation they strive to influence the innermost feelings of an audience. This quality of freedom and creativity is very important in art education. But it is also important in design education. Artists dealing with social and political issues can trigger design and visual communication students away from solution-focused strategies and designs to look at and reflect upon their education in a different way. Design is not just about the creation of things. It is a way of thinking that can help to shape the future of society.

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