

Soft Activism • Exploring pedagogic engagement in the 'clean-tech playground'

Academic Essays

ABSTRACT

This paper will explore pedagogic engagement in a Dutch sustainability site, De Ceuvel. Self-labelled as the 'clean-tech playground', De Ceuvel is a publicly accessible site which houses scientists, creatives and a café, and whose ambitions focus on the transition towards a sustainable future, given the context of the current ecological crisis. Drawing upon a two-month research internship, I suggest that sensory and aesthetic engagements are fundamental to the site's function by allowing pedagogic transmission. I introduce the concept 'soft activism' as a means of exploring pedagogic engagements and the activist sensorium.

keywords: sustainability, 'soft activism', pedagogy, aesthetics, senses

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In Amsterdam's Noord district, nestled amongst willow trees and sat on the water's edge, is a community of land-bound houseboats. This is De Ceuvel: the 'clean-tech playground'. Far from the city-centre's wobbly canal houses and hordes of tourists, a different picture emerges. De Ceuvel is a scruffy sanctuary, a green 'urban oasis' in a jungle of concrete. Like most of the land on the northern border of Amsterdam's river IJ, the area has an industrial history.

Throughout the twentieth century, the site that now houses De Ceuvel operated as a shipyard where boats were hauled ashore from the canal to be cleaned. The lack of environmental regulations at the time left the soil polluted with heavy metals, and the site was subsequently uninhabited until the early 2000s. However, after the municipality created a competition for a free ten-year tender for the site's development in 2012, it was collaboratively transformed by the winning team of landscape designers, architects, and a sustainability consultancy firm into the 'regenerative urban oasis'

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that it is today (De Ceuvel 2019). De Ceuvel's surrounding Buiksloterham district area is being rapidly developed with a distinct emphasis on sustainability, focusing on 'circular, smart and bio-based development' (Metabolic 2019). The area is also riddled with issues of gentrification as land prices rise dramatically.

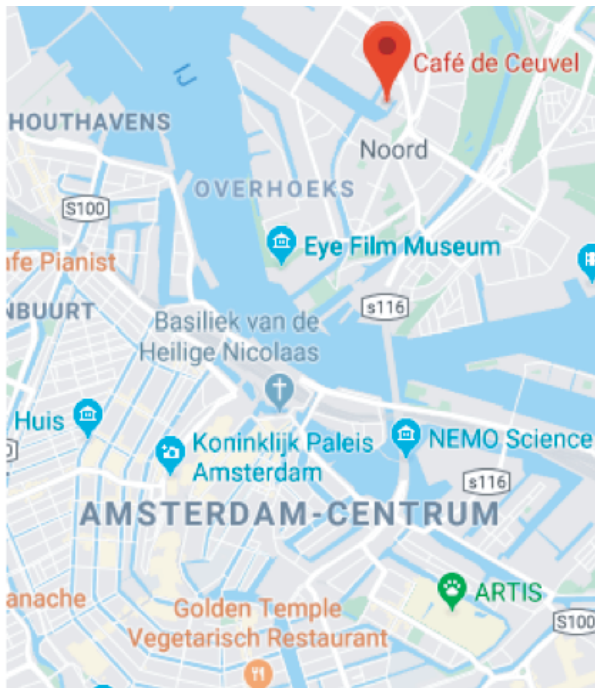


Figure 1: Map of Amsterdam and de Ceuvel (Google Maps 2019)

De Ceuvel opens out to a café and a colourful courtyard, with people sitting outside enjoying rare bursts of Northern-European sunshine. Steel tracks are still etched into the concrete of the courtyard; a reminder from when they were once used to transport the ships. Occasionally, the concrete cracks to reveal tufts of grass and a slight orange smear as the remaining polluting metals stain the ground. The site's three zones are illustrated on figure 3. On the left is the greenhouse and tech-boat, which grow herbs for the café. There is also a houseboat called 'Metabolic Lab', which provides

space for workshops, film screenings, and talks. In the centre are the café and courtyard, used for larger events, such as De Ceuvel's annual festival. On the right are thirteen land-bound houseboats that act as offices for scientists and entrepreneurs working on sustainability projects, and as government-subsidised studio spaces. A winding path, elevated above a tangle of elephant grass and willow trees, circles the houseboats. The greenery is referred to as the purification park due to the processes of phytoremediation that the plants undertake, removing pollutants from the soil. Together, these elements comprise the 'clean-tech playground'.



Figure 2: The De Ceuvel courtyard, with café on the left, and steel tracks in the foreground (Source: Alice 2019)

De Ceuvel is registered as a 'broedplaats' [breeding ground] in line with Dutch governance terminology. Thijs, the 'cultural programmer' at De Ceuvel, explained the oxymoronic nature of a 'broedplaats' as a 'government-sanctioned free space'. Typically, 'broedplaats' are sites which were previously squatted, and have subsequently been granted legal status by the municipality. As a 'broedplaats', De Ceuvel houses scientists and entrepreneurs developing new sustainable technologies,

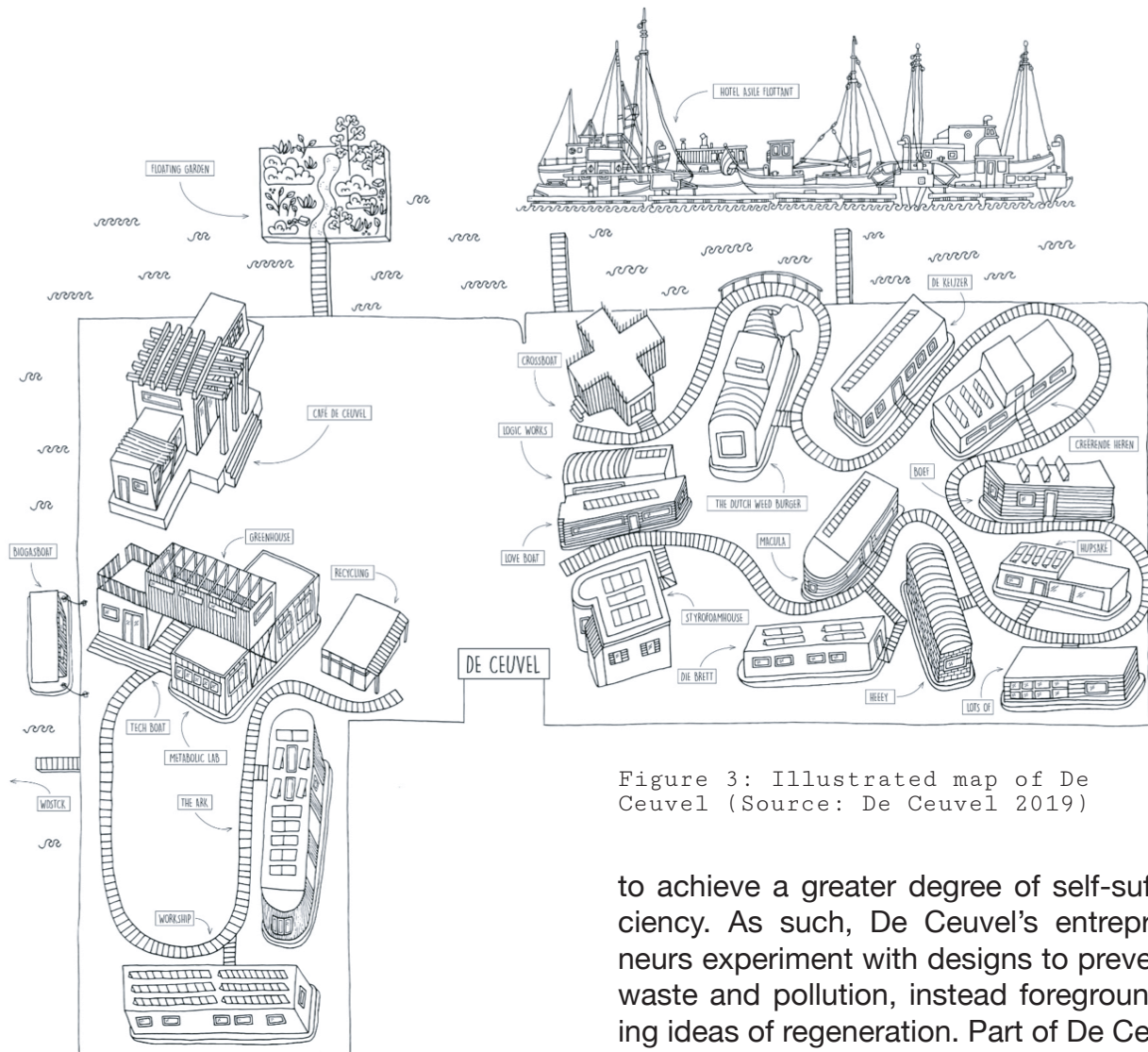


Figure 3: Illustrated map of De Ceuvel (Source: De Ceuvel 2019)

and creative activists encouraging people to engage with these developments as a means of collaboratively inspiring the transition towards more sustainable ways of living. The various components of De Ceuvel do not work in isolation; instead, they are in conversation with one another. My paper focuses on these intersections, asking how modes of engagement function within De Ceuvel.

De Ceuvel's vision of sustainability revolves around an ambition to be materially circular, which is to say that material waste is reduced and reused, in an effort

to achieve a greater degree of self-sufficiency. As such, De Ceuvel's entrepreneurs experiment with designs to prevent waste and pollution, instead foregrounding ideas of regeneration. Part of De Ceuvel's ambitions revolve around the premise that 'not only the transition to a circular economy and society is a technical change, but also a cultural one. Through independent art and cultural programming we hope to inspire kindred spirits and to involve them in a larger, growing movement from innovation to a sustainable country and a world' (De Ceuvel 2019). The site hosts a variety of film screenings, activist meetings, arts exhibitions, workshops, and an annual festival, all open to the public, as a means of inspiring this transition through experimentation and creativity, in the hope of making sustainability 'tangible, accessible

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and fun' (De Ceuvel 2019). De Ceuvel is unconventional, and occupies a unique middle-ground between activism, education and leisure, resulting in ambiguities about the site's identity. I suggest that De Ceuvel is best understood as a utopian social development project, expanding comprehensions of social action beyond protest or formal institutional structures. As a co-founder of De Ceuvel, Daan, described, their vision was intended to be 'kind of inspirational, or inviting, like, this is what's possible!' Taking a cue from discussions of 'soft speech' (Mitchell 2018) and 'soft science' (de Costa & Philip 2008), I propose that the concept 'soft activism' is fruitful, and I will use this throughout my analysis. De Ceuvel's activism can be described as soft because it is informal, experimental and accessibly designed, attempting to traverse the confines of traditional activist projects. It is a form of activism that is intentionally porous to both disciplinary boundaries and material sensitivities. To the best of my knowledge, this terminology has not been deployed in anthropology hitherto.

Amidst the recent rhetoric within sustainability and environmental activism that 'the science has spoken' (IPCC 2019) regarding the ongoing ecological crisis, De Ceuvel's emphasis on non-scientific and non-technological processes seems curious. Intrigued by the ambition to transition to a circular economy and society through cultural means, my research asks why non-scientific and non-technological processes are crucial to De Ceuvel's sustainability mission, and how these relate to the site's pedagogic intention. Throughout my analysis, I use the phrase 'pedagogic intention' in relation to De Ceuvel's socially aspirational ambitions to 'transition to a circular economy and soci-

ety' (De Ceuvel 2019). This intention encompasses the desire to change people's ways of thinking and acting in the name of sustainability relying on processes of education. This paper responds to the current ecological crisis and analyses modes of engagement with De Ceuvel's message of sustainability.

The term sustainability is highly contested, with Tsing recently exclaiming, "sustainability" is the dream of passing a liveable earth to future generations, human and nonhuman. The term is also used to cover up destructive practices, and this use has become so prevalent that the word most often makes me laugh and cry' (Tsing [in Brightman & Lewis] 2017, 51). Indeed, there is much debate over the construction of scientific truths in relation to sustainability, and inconsistencies within the realm of sustainable development and environmentalisms (Haraway 1988; Ingold 2019; Brightman & Lewis 2017). I use the term sustainability throughout this paper to mirror De Ceuvel's vision. This paper focuses on the ways in which people can be made to see, and potentially made receptive to, this vision. Brightman and Lewis' *The Anthropology of Sustainability* (2017) provides a comprehensive analysis of the complexities and critiques of contemporary understandings of sustainability, and it is this body of literature that this paper contributes to by relating it to questions of pedagogy and aesthetics.

In line with Haraway (1988), I do not claim to be a neutral observer, and hope that a thorough explication of my own positionality enables my work greater validity. The controversiality of engaged anthropology has been a topic of much contention (Sanford & Angel-Ajani 2006; Low & Merry 2010). As Low and Merry have pointed out, activist and academic

endeavours are ‘never autonomous’ (Low & Merry 2010: S211). Hale has forwarded a vision of ‘activist research as a method through which we affirm a political alignment with an organised group of people in struggle and allow dialogue with them to shape each phase of the process’ (Hale 2006: 97). Despite my consideration of De Ceuvel as a site of ‘soft activism’ where people choose to submit themselves to De Ceuvel’s message and are under no obligation to change their actions accordingly, elements of Hale’s assertion ring true. Throughout my research I similarly aligned myself with De Ceuvel’s ambitions through my interests and actions, enabling ongoing dialogue about their ambitions to create a more sustainable future.

Sensory and aesthetic engagements

“For me, as a person, it makes a lot more impact if I’m actually here, if I actually touch it, walk around it, and also... it’s a bit like ‘uhh’ [she rolls her eyes and points her palms to the sky], but feel a certain type of energy, or feel bonds... you know, when you get here and you feel like ‘aah’, this urban oasis thing, that’s something you have to experience... it really helps to be here, to feel it...”

Luna, De Ceuvel team

Luna’s comment illustrates the importance of bodies, senses, and emotions; people’s ability ‘to feel it’, in their experience of De Ceuvel’s vision of sustainability. This paper focuses on material experiences, where the sensate body meets the sensual world. I address two lines of analysis. First, I consider the role of the sensory body in relation to recent anthropologies of embodiment and

emplacement. This builds upon the spatial turn in anthropology and contributes to recent calls to re-ground analyses of pedagogies in material practice (Gilbert 2013; Hasse 2015; Ingold 2000; van de Port 2011; Webster & Wolfe 2013). Second, I propose that ‘aesthetic formations’ (Meyer 2009) are essential within De Ceuvel, creating modes of feeling together and encouraging new ways of thinking and acting (Eagleton 1990; Webster & Wolfe 2013). As such, this paper argues that sensory interactions and ‘aesthetic formations’ are crucial to understanding De Ceuvel as a space of pedagogic transmission and transformation.



Figure 4: Sander in the greenhouse (photograph by author)

A sensory reality

Sander sat in the corner of the greenhouse, bathed in blue light from the reflective plastic on the ceiling. He is in charge of the aquaponics system; an experiment where a wall of plants and herbs are grown inside the greenhouse. Above the greenery, an irrigation pipe feeds water down through the layers of basil, mint, and edible flowers. Fish

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faeces from a tank below the planters is carried through this pipe, enriching the soil with nitrates and phosphates. This same water is purified by the plants as they absorb the nutrients, allowing it to be returned to the fish, in turn allowing the cycle to be repeated. Sander and I discussed his project amongst the soundscape of rhythmically falling water droplets, breathing in the thick, wet air. Sander explained why he thought visitors to De Ceuvel liked to see it:

“Well, I think it’s because you have plants in here, you have life going on, in the middle of a city... I think that’s what attracts people, it’s this green wall, you come in and you have the sound of running water, all of this life going on, the smell... so it’s catchy, it’s interactive, it’s real.”

He went on to say:

“You can read about it on the internet, of course. That’s what I’ve done as well. But there’s another thing when you come in the place, and you see how it works. You see how the plants are growing, hear how the water runs, you see the screws... Again, you are working with the physical rather than the abstract world”.

Sander’s comments linked the senses with the ‘real’. Similarly, Aya, the landscape architect who maintained the purification park, explained; ‘I think that being here adds a lot to the experience, and when people see it, it’s not theory anymore, we did it!’ Again, her emphasis lay on the ‘real’, and ‘[doing] it’, emphasising practice over theory. Sander and Aya’s focus was located in their immediate, material world, reliant on the body as experiencing (Csordas 1990).



Figure 5: The “green wall” (photograph by author)

This reliance on sensory participation as a mode of understanding was not limited to those working at De Ceuvel. One of my interviewees, a woman named Alice, similarly highlighted the importance of the body in understanding the ‘real’. She first visited De Ceuvel accompanying a group of French delegates who had come to learn about the projects and experiments taking place, acting as their translator. I sat with her after their visit, discussing how she had experienced the site. She explained:

“I feel that the kind of atmosphere it creates, it totally opens you up, to then looking at things and seeing what they really are, so then you see the [bio-]filter, and the whole logic of this, the houseboat, how it filters the water... it’s sort of a physical experience, you know? The body becomes part of the understanding... it feels very kind, very inspirational, and then you experience it fully, the knowledge that is being passed on...”

Like Sander and Aya, her comments pointed to the importance of her body and senses in her learning process, and the destabilisation of a sensorium allowing new ways of seeing. Her words seem strikingly similar to those of van de Port in his discussion of the Bahian Candomblé, where ‘revelations that come to you, engulf you, unsolicited, unpredictable, as an immediate fully embodied knowing,’ as part of his discussion of the ‘really real’ (van de Port 2011: 12, 23). Despite van de Port’s ethnography centring on mystical and religious experiences, both observations point to the need to seriously consider bodily engagements as central to knowledge processes. From these examples, I propose that embodied participation is essential in creation of the De Ceuvel ‘reality’; the ‘real’ is reliant on bodily and sensory interaction, emplaced within the material world.



Figure 6: The bio-filters used to clean the water used in the houseboats (photograph by author)

As Thijs explained, ‘sometimes you really

have to experience something in real life... when you’re here, then you really feel and see it, and it becomes tangible, it becomes reality.’

Building upon Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the preobjective (1962) and Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice (1977), Csordas has argued ‘the body is not an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the subject of culture, or in other words as the existential ground of culture’ (Csordas 1990: 5). However, there has recently been a notable shift away from the body as the subject of culture, to encompass emplaced understandings of our environment (Harrison 2000; Ingold 2000; Ingold & Vergunst 2008; Low 2003; Pink 2011). In line with this, Low has proposed that ‘embodied space is the location where human experience and consciousness takes on material and spatial form’ (Low 2003: 9). I suggest that within De Ceuvel the body is actively embedded and engaged in material surroundings, both producing cultural form, and acting as a means for expression (Ingold & Vergunst 2008: 2).

The emphasis on ‘tangible’ world-making manifests itself also in the belief that traditional academic approaches are disconnected from the ‘real’. Almost everybody working at De Ceuvel was highly educated, determined, and ambitious in their utopic visions. However, there was ongoing dissatisfaction with written, traditional, academic forms of communication and engagement surrounding sustainable education. After having been away from the site for a few days, Sander, the man from the greenhouse, asked where I had been. I explained that I had gone to the library in order to do some research. This sparked an ongoing joke about how pointless my ‘library time’ was in comparison to the

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processes and practices taking place within De Ceuvel. Similarly, as my fieldwork drew to a close, one of the De Ceuvel team questioned, 'Why are you going back to University? The earth is dying!' I recognise this was not a critique of me personally, nor the calibre of university output, which those working at De Ceuvel valued very highly. Instead, it continued the emphasis on emplaced participation in De Ceuvel's vision of sustainability. Aya explained, '[you have to take the] knowledge that's there from the universities and just use it practically!' calling for implemented practice as opposed to theory; prioritising sensory engagement in one's environment. In this sense, there is a de-privileging of written text in favour of embodied and experienced action. Thijs explained:

"Yeah, I mean, of course we have to get information to the people, and to inspire them, and also give them something practical which they can actually build in their homes if they want to... We do feel this sort of missionary urge to give people information, and make them change their lives, and knowledge is a really important aspect of that"

Thijs's comments suggest that De Ceuvel can be understood as a transitory space, enabling the move from theory to practice, in order to achieve their pedagogic ambitions. Of course, there is a distinct irony in writing about sensations and corporeality whilst relying on language that contradicts the inversion of knowledge previously outlined. Van de Port discusses his discontent regarding 'an academy of science where logocentrism reigns unchallenged' critiquing the 'fiction that a scientific discourse offers the privileged forms to represent and come to know reality' (Van de Port 2011:

15). Similarly, Barad has criticised that overwhelming power of language to 'determine what is real' (Barad 2003: 802). It is possible to find a commonality between these authors and those at De Ceuvel. World-making practices at De Ceuvel do not centre on words. They centre on emplaced learning, situated in the body, and embedded within material practices as a mode of 'being-in-the-world'. These processes add weight to the spatial turn in the anthropology of emplacement, calling for the need to situate analyses of the body within the sensate, material world. It is in this sense that De Ceuvel's 'soft activism' encompasses a mode of being-in-the-world.

Drawing upon recent theories of New Materialism, Hasse calls for the reconceptualization of analyses of learning within material practices. She proposes that 'cultural learning is moving matter changing our material and conceptual (as well as visible and emotional, tangible and motivational, present and future) fields of attention' (Hasse 2015: 296). The pedagogic emphasis on sensory and 'sensational forms' (Meyer 2009) creating 'reality' develops Lave and Wenger's suggestion that 'learning is a way of being in the social world, not a way of coming to know about it' (Lave & Wenger 1991: 24). Within the De Ceuvel community of practice, pedagogic processes are dependent on embedded world-making practices, and reliant on sensory engagement. In this sense, being-in-the-world can be understood in the dialectical sense of 'becoming' (Low 2003: 14).

'Aesthetic formations': ways of seeing and modes of feeling

One afternoon, two visitors sitting

at the De Ceuvel café stopped me as I walked through the square. They were curious about the site, having never visited before, and asked me if I knew anything about it. I offered to show them some of the projects taking place and explained the ideas and ambitions behind the site's conception. As we walked together, the first woman exclaimed, '[it's] really interesting.... The presentation of [De Ceuvel], the design... the playfulness... the feeling, it's like sending us back to being kids in school.... it's like a new way of learning!' The second visitor, Hana, added '[it's] inspiring us to think in different ways so we can act in different ways'. These women's comments illustrated their perception of an inviting, experimental atmosphere, and a communal mode of feeling.

The significance of this atmosphere in fostering people's engagement with De Ceuvel was not limited solely to visitors to the café. An elderly Canadian woman visiting Amsterdam to partake in the citywide 'We Make the City' festival came to De Ceuvel to push her manifesto of 'integral cities', outlining how she envisaged our shared future. Curious, I asked her how she planned to circulate her manifesto. She explained she wanted to 'look for places like De Ceuvel.... it has energy... you need to feel that feeling to get interested', and that such places were needed to 'change the philosophy' in relation to sustainable thinking. It was striking that she immediately focused on the feeling and communality of the space, rather than the expertise, connections, or professional reach of the people working there. Comments such as these illustrate the fundamental importance of the feelings of inspiration, invitation and being welcomed at De Ceuvel. These feelings are central in fostering people's engage-

ment with the site's transitory and transformative processes. I mentioned this observation to Thijs, who seemed unphased. He summarised others' experiences by saying:

"When you walk around here you get inspired by the environment, by the architecture, and the greenery, and all the things that are happening here, and all the people who are working here... I think people get emotional or at least it moves them... maybe just a little bit... but yeah, it does move people into believing in the green fight and making a change in their lives."

In line with Aristotle's notion of aesthetics, Meyer has defined the aesthetic as 'our corporeal capability on the basis of power given in our psyche to perceive objects in the world via our five different sensorial modes [...], and at the same time a specific constellation of the senses as a whole', connecting the aesthetic to the sensory texture of all experience (Meyer & Verrips 2008: 21 [in Meyer 2009: 6]). The term aesthetics is understood as such throughout this analysis, rather than the more common association with the beautiful, or considerations of bourgeois hegemonic domination through habitus (Bourdieu 1984). Instead, the aesthetic is a category enabling the analysis of sensory life, locating the aesthetic within, rather than separate from all other aspects of social life (Eagleton 1990; Zuñiga 1989: 41). Meyer puts forward the concept of 'aesthetic formations', arguing for the 'formative impact of shared aesthetics through which subjects are shaped by tuning their senses, inducing experiences, molding their bodies, and making sense, and which materialises in things' (Meyer 2009: 7). In line with this, aesthetic formations produce a particular subjectivity or

habitus. The concept of 'aesthetic formations' is highly productive in relation to De Ceuvel, and forms the conceptual basis for the ethnographic considerations. The concept illustrates that knowledge produced in the body is neither ahistorical nor asocial. Instead, modes of feeling are learnt. As such, the women's engagement with De Ceuvel must be understood within a sensorial structure that renders their experience meaningful, fostering their engagement. It is necessary to note, however, that within Meyer's work, 'aesthetic formations' are groups of people, whereas in De Ceuvel I suggest that the 'aesthetic formation' encompasses wider material relations. In response to Meyer's 'plea for a broader understanding of aesthetics', I propose that De Ceuvel is, in itself, an 'aesthetic formation', enabling shared modes of formative interaction and engagement (Meyer 2009: 9).

Conclusion

As Hana, the visitor from the square, said, these modes of feeling encourage people to 'think in different ways so [they] can act in different ways'. In Rival's recent ethnography of a sustainability park in São Paulo, her informants laughed at the 'absurdity of turning agroecology into aesthetics for urbanites' (Rival [in Brightman & Lewis 2017: 195]). The examples from De Ceuvel sharply contrast this, placing 'aesthetic formations' as crucial to the site's communal modes of engagement and pedagogic practice. Similarly, recent journals that focus on formal learning have outlined that 'learning can be enhanced via what could be referred to as choosing the 'scenic route' of experiential learning' (Webster & Wolfe 2013, 24). Again, the examples from De Ceuvel contradict understandings of the

experiential as the 'scenic route', due to 'aesthetic formations' being indispensable to the site's pedagogic intention, rather than a secondary addition. Within De Ceuvel, 'aesthetic formations', reliant on sensory participation, attempt to facilitate new 'ways of thinking' and modes of feeling, with the aim to prompt dynamic engagements with sustainable living.

De Ceuvel is an experiment with sustainability which invites people to participate in sensory and emotive modes of interaction, using engaged processes of social practice to co-create visions of sustainability and reality. Through the extension of analyses of formal learning to the informal playground of 'soft activism', I have shown that pedagogy within De Ceuvel is dependent on the invitation of sensory engagements with the material environment, introducing visitors into an 'aesthetic formation'. The force of feeling in De Ceuvel necessitates a consideration of pedagogic practices as located within the sensate body, rather than in written forms of knowledge transmission (Haraway 1988; Meyer 2005). Developing van de Port's call for radical empiricism which encompasses the sensational and the sensuous, I have extended the criticism of the alleged incompatibility between scientific and sensory knowledge formations, illustrating a vision of sustainability activism dependant on non-scientific and non-technological processes (van de Port 2011: 20, 25). Furthermore, this paper adds weight to anthropology's 'urgency and political relevance' (Latour [in Brightman & Lewis] 2017: 40) in the face of the Anthropocene through elaborating the idea of soft activism and illustrating that ecologies of pedagogic engagements are located within material, sensate, and affective practice.

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