

University of Groningen

Captured in fiction? The art of commoning urban space

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Published in:
The rise of the common city

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2022

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Otte, H., & Gielen, P. (2022). Captured in fiction? The art of commoning urban space. In L. Volont, T. Lijster, & P. Gielen (Eds.), *The rise of the common city: On the culture of commoning* (pp. 197-208). ASP.

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CHAPTER 12

CAPTURED IN FICTION? THE ART OF COMMONING URBAN SPACE

Hanka Otte & Pascal Gielen

Urban commons are often seen as one of the solutions to the problems major-minority cities are facing today. Sharing and managing common good like public space, on the basis of horizontality and reciprocity, that could provide for a much more equal participation in city life, is the idea. However, the huge challenge for urban commons lies exactly in the heterogeneity of urban populations. How to connect highly different actors to share, manage and reproduce common pool resources (CPR's), when one of the best-known scientists in the research of commons, Elinor Ostrom, empirically assessed that CPR's are best preserved by homogeneous societies?

Extensive norms (...) that narrowly define 'proper' behaviour (...) make it feasible for individuals to live in close interdependence on many fronts without excessive conflict. (...) None of these situations involves participants who vary greatly in regard to ownership of assets, skills, knowledge, ethnicity, race, or other variables that could strongly divide a group of individuals.

(Ostrom, 1990: 88-89).

For heterogeneous societies to be able to live and work together on an equal basis, bridges are needed to connect different shores without trying to change or adapt them. It is this kind of external social cohesion (Otte, 2019) that should prevent the commons from excluding humans (and non-human lives). Art as an expression of subjectification, is capable of providing for such bridges, because it can challenge one's perception of his or her reality and therefor open up to realities of the Other (Otte, 2019). However, to realise these bridges outside of the fictional space, the right balance between the autonomy of the art practice and its relation to the social environment is required. In three case studies, we explored whether practices of commoning art in an urban environment can provide for such a balance. We found that the success of these projects very much depended on the interplay between the commoning art project and its urban stakeholders, especially the local authorities as the owner and manager of public space. An interplay that is not evident, because of the different forms of democratic participation that both parties represent and perform. In the analysis of the studies,

we detected three forms of participation that can be traced within political science and political philosophy. Before we explain how these forms supported (or worked against) the different goals of urban commoning the projects had in mind, we will first describe these three forms of democracy and their characteristics.

REPRESENTATION, DELIBERATION, AND AGONISM

In the scientific literature of the past two decades, three forms of democratic participation can be roughly distinguished. The first one is the well-known representative democracy as studied by scholars such as Alexis de Tocqueville (2011) and Max Weber (1988). This type of political participation occurred in still young nation states in the nineteenth century, together with the political emancipation of the bourgeois. It therefore fits well into the liberal philosophy that places the individual at its centre. This system is founded on the representation of the people through elections that are held every four or five years. In such a democratic order, a cultural policy on one hand serves to strengthen the identity and legitimacy of the nation state. It does so with national museums, theatres, libraries, and an official national language, statues and paintings of national heroes, and events that give the nation state historical foundation – in short, the national canon. On the other hand, the cultural policy serves the—individualistic—bourgeois culture. The civil struggle takes place here around the issue of suffrage, mainly for the lower social classes or for women. Culture is primarily seen as ‘high’ culture, or as the only good culture that leads to the edification of the masses and *Bildung*. This is why this culture is often promoted in top-down fashion through, for example, a national historical or art-historical canon. The postman should also be able to listen to Bach, is the idea behind the policy that assumes that there is only one good or legitimate culture (Bourdieu, 1974).

By the end of the 1960s, this notion had become contentious. Workers, artists, and students took to the streets to demand the democratisation of overly rigid and overly hierarchical state institutions and other institutes (parliament, university, museums). Debates, discussions, and negotiations were the basic ingredients of this second wave of participation, also referred to as deliberative democracy. Strongly influenced by Jürgen Habermas’ ‘communicative action’ (Habermas, 1981) and his analysis of the origin of the public space (Habermas, 1962), this form of democracy assumes that consensus can be arrived at on the basis of debate and rational arguments. Whereas in a representative democracy the civil struggle focuses on the quantitative vote (the number of votes is what counts), in a deliberative democracy the struggle is about the quality of that vote (what counts is what one says). Thus, the attention shifts from political democracy to cultural democracy. Education, language, well-substantiated knowledge, and arguments determine the democratic clout of citizens. The civil struggle now revolves around cultural themes, such as the recognition of folk culture and other ethnic cultures. Additionally, the second feminist wave also claimed the right to an equal— cultural—

treatment of men and women in society, education and job opportunities. One could say that parallel to the interest of a deliberative democracy a so-called ‘cultural turn’ takes place. This is also expressed by the post-modernist debate, which, at least in theory, places high and low culture on equal footing. However, by its emphasis on empowerment, education, and expertise, this form of democracy has its own privileged class. This is no longer the bourgeois, but a white middle-class, which—thanks to the democratisation of education and to social mobility—defines both the political and cultural landscape. With regard to the latter this means that the various platforms and stages are primarily taken up by white middle-class art. From then on, cultural taste is not so much determined by the eccentric bourgeois and individualistic artist but by the teacher, the art mediator, or the art educator (Bourdieu, 1979). In other words, just like a representative democracy, a deliberative democracy also has its exclusion mechanisms.

The riots with so-called ‘random violence’ that broke out in American and European cities since the 1990s are often explained as being a reaction to these exclusion mechanisms (Gielen, 2015). Up to and including the Occupy Movement, these protests are often seen by both politicians and mainstream media as ‘random’ or ‘senseless’, either because the ‘rioters’ simply pose no political demands or because these demands cannot be understood unequivocally (such as in the case of the Indignados). Such eruptions can however be seen as symptoms of the fact that—both within a representative and a deliberative democracy—certain segments of the population are not being heard. These are primarily groups with little education, or immigrants who do not speak the national language or don’t use the ‘proper’ (i.e., white, middle-class) vocabulary. It is one of the reasons why political philosophers and sociologists such as Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Jacques Rancière and Manuel Castells point out the civil and political importance of affects and emotion for a democracy. This brings us to a third form of participation, which, inspired by Mouffe, we call ‘agonistic’ (Mouffe, 2013). An agonistic democracy assumes—in line with Oliver Marchart (Marchart, 2007)—that democratic politics is ‘post-foundational’. This means that there is no foundation for power, such as God is in a theocracy or the majority is in a representative democracy, or a ratio is in a deliberative democracy. There can be consensus in a democracy about who can be in power and how this power can be obtained but an agonistic model assumes that this consensus is the product of hegemony. This means that the consensus arrived at is always that of a specific, privileged group that has obtained the control of power in a society. However, by suggesting that this consensus is not that of a certain power faction but of society as a whole, the opinions and cultures of subaltern groups and other alleged minorities are obscured and excluded. An agonistic democracy now assumes that consensus never applies to the whole of society and therefore can always be contested. In other words, dissensus is always possible.

Characteristic for the civil struggle after this ‘affective turn’ is that it focuses on *doing*, on performance. The third feminist wave, for example, does not so much aspire to

a typical male career or role pattern but rather tries to form and claim its own identity in a performative manner (Butler, 1990; Honig, 1995), in order to give its own (feminine) meaning to a profession, organisational structure, or politics. Performance also expresses itself in so-called pre-figurative politics (Boggs, 1977) whereby citizens organise themselves in a different way and thereby effectively realise and test alternative political models of organisation or, in a broader sense, social models. An agonistic political model assumes that in addition to the vote—either quantitatively or qualitatively—there are also other forms of democratic participation. Democracy is therefore not limited to a proper debate in public or civic space, but translates itself in *acting* in civil space (Gielen, 2017). And it is exactly here that art and cultural codes may play a crucial part. After all, artists have the talent and training to express themselves in other ways than through rational arguments. Expression in visual language, dance, music but also using an idiosyncratic vocabulary or presenting an alternative narrative are part of the core business of the arts. An agonistic cultural policy will therefore primarily create the conditions (cf. Rancière) for making (as yet) invisible, inaudible, and unutterable democratic demands visible and audible.

COMMONING POLITICS

One of the demands and practices that, for the past thirty years, have remained unseen, and has also been repressed and suppressed, is that of the commons. Commoning in fact is a form of participation whereby commoners give form to their (social) environment by collective self-management of resources. To achieve this, commoners use competencies that are required in both a deliberative and an agonistic democracy. In addition to ‘doing’; for example, setting up an organisation, a blog, a platform, or developing rules, a lot of discussion and negotiation takes place (such as in assemblies), among commoners. Although commoners will vote every once in a while, in order to arrive at a decision (representation), the emphasis is on deliberation and agonistics (cf. supra). Especially the development of common initiatives rests on this participative model. Commoning practices tend to develop particularly in domains for which governments show no interest or where they fail to act and where market parties do not or not yet see, potential for profit. This third space between state and market is that of the civil initiative where citizens take matters into their own hands. And, according to Castells, such civil actions originate in emotions (Castells, 2015). Also, passions generate the energy and drive for such actions.

However, for commoning practices to develop sustainably, rules, forms of management and structures need to be developed. Commoning politics then means 1) agreeing on rules for the collective self-management of resources, 2) designing strategies to safeguard the commons from interference by the government or the market and to realise an expansion of the commons, by which 3) exchange and community bonds are developed in alternative ways. We have already written elsewhere how culture,

in the anthropological sense as the source of ‘giving meaning to themselves and to the society in which human-beings live’ (Gielen, 2015), forms the basis for these commoning politics. Whereas both communism and (neo)liberalism see the economy as the foundation of society, so-called ‘commonism’ regards economy, politics but also ecology as the outcome of processes of giving meaning. This is why commonism is able to propose alternative forms of economy, politics, and living together in a broader sense, on the basis of culture. In the cases discussed below, we therefore see art and culture as critical allies that influence a democracy and in a broader sense a society, mainly through deliberative and agonistic participation. In other words, artists and cultural organisations relate to the three outlined forms of participation, which, let’s be clear, can exist beside and with each other in a democracy, albeit with varying degrees of tension.

How they (can) do this exactly, we will try to clarify by providing three case studies in which artists and/or cultural organisations attempt to change the management of common resources by the city government or market parties into a management according to commoning principles. The project *Montaña Verde* was about a public square in the city of Antwerp that was to be ‘given back to its residents and users’. With the *Tower of Babel* multilingualism was the communal resource that was reimaged. And with ‘De Grond der Dingen’ (The Ground of Things) an attempt was made to equally redistribute part of the land on which the city of Mechelen is built.

Before setting out on our journey through these colourful cultural initiatives, we must stress that we only analyse their commoning politics and the interplay of the three outlined participative forms from their relationship and negotiation with city government agencies. We make no analysis of the forms of participation clarifying the internal operation and organisation of, for example, the initiative-taking artists and volunteers among themselves. Internal forms of participation can be very different from the ‘external’ forms entered into, with government agencies or market parties.

Montaña Verde

During spring and summer of 2018, the Spanish architect collective Recetas Urbanas realised the artwork *Montaña Verde* in the De Coninck Square in Antwerp. The idea was to ‘give back this part of the city to its residents and make it grow to serve the wishes of residents and users’ (City of Antwerp, 2018). The Middelheim Museum and the Green Department, acting on behalf of the city government, were enthusiastic about the agonistic work methods of Recetas Urbanas, which can be described as:

Citizen actions that engender a civil space emancipated from the state ..., as the emancipation of a group that constitutes itself as an active subject capable of engaging with the authorities and disputing their power as a conscious and proactive purposeful citizen.

(Bonet, 2017:166)

However, the slope of the green mountain turned out to be a steep one to climb. This had everything to do with the setting: the project took place in a form the Spaniards found unfamiliar for a public space and the commissioning partner strictly adhered to its civic character, whereas Recetas Urbanas is used to making such a public or civic space, civil again. They do so by working in what they themselves call an ‘a-legal’ manner. Taking human rights as their starting point, they often build works because there is a need for them, because people ask for these works, often without official permission. Part of the building process is to build a new relationship with representatives of the representative democracy. This is why in every building project Recetas Urbanas bargains for a ‘social protocol’, often drawn up with the aid of lawyers. These protocols stipulate the right of use by the groups involved, according to commoning principles in an agreement with governments. By *doing*, especially by starting to build immediately, the architects manage to manoeuvre themselves into a negotiating position opposite politicians and policymakers. Civil action and agonistic acting thus triggers a process of deliberation. However, in Antwerp this tactic of commoning politics failed and that is what makes this case so interesting, as it shows what happens when the political game between the various forms of participation starts to falter.

The reason for the project was ‘The year of the Baroque’. The city administration wished for an artwork that would appeal to a lot of tourists, the Green Department wanted to realise something sustainable to sensitise citizens to the green ideal and the Middelheim Museum aimed for involving local residents in an art project. The experts of both departments saw potential in the agonistic and deliberative work method of Recetas Urbanas. However, it wasn’t long before this method was at odds with the representative mode of operation of the city services. This already began during the decision-making stage. Together with Recetas Urbanas, the organisers selected a suitable place in the city. It was to be a ‘grey’ (i.e., not-green) public space, accessible to tourists but one that was, at the request of Recetas Urbanas and the Middelheim Museum, mainly in use by residents living at the margins of society and whose voice—in a representative democracy—was hardly being heard. Eventually the De Coninck Square was chosen, infamous for its drugs-related crime which the city had been trying for years to combat with measures ranging from 24-hour camera surveillance and strict police controls to attempts at gentrification. The agonistic proposal by Recetas Urbanas was to establish new social connections through the metaphor of ill or ‘bad’ weeds:

The huge challenge for cities is to bring extremely different people to live in and share the same environment and to design this environment for all. Obviously, there will be some left behind. Because they are too different, not ‘adapted’ or ‘integrated’, sick or lost... they are considered as the ‘bad weed’ of urban life. Yet, everyone has a right to the city, to participate in city life and the city’s development. ... If we want to rethink how we build and live in our cities, it is crucial to include those who are excluded now. Let’s use this moment to grow social links as much as green; to re-introduce bad weed and wild weed, by changing the way we look at them.

(Recetas Urbanas, 2017)

During the first negotiations Recetas Urbanas came away empty-handed. It was decided not to follow the metaphor of ‘bad weed’, but to remain close to the theme of the Baroque by using herbs and fruit trees ‘that were cultivated during the Baroque era for their nutritious or healing qualities’ (Hermans & Boons, 2018: 91). Normally, since civil action is their trademark, Recetas Urbanas do have a strong negotiating position vis-à-vis the authorities. However, their commoning attempts to create some empowerment for those who have no voice during the phase of building – such as the residents’ wish to create a temporary safe playground for children or have a debate about the design of the square— failed. The leader of Recetas Urbanas, architect Santiago Cirugeda, was clearly frustrated:

The problem is that we never had political meetings (...) If you want to really make it a social process, you must involve [politicians]. But how can I meet with the district? I don't know where the building district is!

(Cirugeda, 2018).

All discussions were mediated by the city services or by freelancers appointed by them. Therefore, Cirugeda was unable to initiate a deliberative process. Recetas Urbanas had gone along with the logic of a representative democracy and were now unable to turn the tide. The plans were too far advanced and political issues underrepresented. The work was constructed in a top-down manner in the image of the square that the representatives had: a sculpture that would be appealing to tourists and that would refer to Baroque in an artful way, while at the same time making the inhabitants of the square more sensitive to green ideas. As a consequence, there was no ‘giving back this piece of the city’. An agonistic approach didn’t work: residents and users of the square could participate in the plans conceived by others but could no longer contest or change these plans with the help of Recetas Urbanas.

The Tower of Babel

Montaña Verde was dismantled when the ‘Experience Traps’ exhibition ended. The wood and the tools were distributed among the people of Antwerp. Much of the wood was collected by Rooftoptiger, an artist collective that is temporarily housed on the site of a former slaughterhouse in the north of Antwerp. The city service Antwerp Book City, which supports and organises all kinds of literary activities, had introduced them to Antwerp’s city poet 2018-2019, Maud Vanhauwaert. Vanhauwaert wanted to build a Tower of Babel, as a monument to the confusion of tongues in a superdiverse city where more than four hundred languages are spoken and social, economic and ideological differences exist. It so happened that Rooftoptiger had been wanting to build such a tower for a long time. By reversing the legend of the tower, the artists wanted to find out how the multilingualism could be shared as a common pool resource, unlike the representative democracy, which foregrounds only one language, Dutch. Legend has it that the Tower of Babel was never finished because God punished the people who tried

to reach up to heaven with multilingualism so that they could no longer understand each other and had to abandon their ambitious scheme. By contrast, Vanhauwaert says: “It is in our speechlessness that we understand each other best” (Vanhauwaert, 2018).

As with *Montaña Verde*, a suitable location still had to be found during the conceptual phase of the project. Attempts were made to erect a tower somewhere in the city centre, but this always brought with it too many problems in terms of permits and regulations. Eventually, Rooftoptiger decided to use the slaughterhouse site where their workshop is; an old shed owned by a project developer that Rooftoptiger is allowed to use in exchange for participation projects in the neighbourhood. So, a private site. With permission of the owner, it gave the artists the freedom to design everything according to their own ideas. In order to make the site accessible for the public they only needed an event permit from the city, and the fire brigade checked whether the Tower would be built according to safety regulations. Thanks to the collaboration with Antwerp Book City, the permit was given without problems. The city only provided services and did not interfere with the content of the project. For four months, the site became a semi-public space where artists, together with citizens, could shape a multilingual and diverse community. The idea was to erect a high tower from bamboo and other natural materials and to do this together with a great diversity of people from the neighbourhood and elsewhere in Antwerp. A tower from which as many languages as possible would play out through a sound system and where people with various mother tongues could meet. The space was imagined by the artists as one of possibilities, thanks to multilingualism and cultural diversity, elements that are so often seen as problematic by politics and the media. By starting from the wishes and dreams of local residents who had trouble getting their voices heard, by involving as many other languages, artists, volunteers, and sometimes illegals, in the construction and the activities in and around the tower, an agonistic process was initiated. The *Tower of Babel* was eventually shaped by this heterogeneous gang. The whole period of building, weaving, making, organising, talking, cooking, caring, eating, living, in short *doing* together, defined the project of the *Tower of Babel*. During all this, many languages were spoken, including Arabic, French, Wolof, English, Dutch and Russian. Some people came to learn better Dutch, others found out that English gave them more opportunities. But people could understand each other: not just by speaking different languages and helping each other along the way but especially by the doing: by pointing, by demonstrating things, reading each other's faces.

... it is actually through a process and because you are really working with other people [that] you don't really need to know the same language (...). That was really my experience: 'it's not because you don't know a language that you can't work together'. And, actually, this language simply disappears. Just by holding something and saying 'give me a glass' and then saying 'this is a glass', then you have a language ...

(Rombouts, 2020)

The form of participation in this project is deliberative because the use of the space was negotiated with the owner in the preparation stage and the city services gave their blessing. However, it becomes agonistic when it gives a stage and voice to citizens who have difficulty being heard in a representative democracy and who also do not speak the right language to get anything done in a deliberative model. With the *Tower of Babel* many people were given the chance to help design an urban space and a community. However, the civil action—building a multilingual and diverse community—was only temporary and the commoning politics took place on a site for which future plans had already been made.

In the near future, the project developer will turn this site into a road that will run through a completely renovated neighbourhood with high-rise apartments. So, the site already has a destination that is being structured top-down: the project developer, together with city planning and other stakeholders, makes a plan for what the space will look like, will build according to the design, and then the residents can move in. The *Tower of Babel* happened independent of these plans, meaning that in the setup the project did not have a direct influence on the designs or building plans that are already in place. It was a cultural event in a fictional space (just like *Montaña Verde* was, which remained part of a visual arts exhibition. In the latter case, the city services did what they could to keep it that way, by reining in the agonistic attempts by *Recetas Urbanas* as much as possible, from a representative logic. In the case of the *Tower of Babel* they did not have to make this effort, as the project was performed entirely outside public space. On the one hand this gives Rooftoptiger and the city poet a lot of space to have a place for an agonistic form of democracy but on the other hand it raises the question of how far it will actually have a place in society. In other words: can the initiated deliberation be continued and thus also make real political claims from this fictitious site?

The Ground of Things

The Theatre Arsenaal/Lazarus and municipal museum Hof van Busleyden began the project, 'The Ground of Things', in 2019. The goal was to address inequality by claiming one square metre of ground for each inhabitant of Mechelen. After all, the main cause of socio-economic inequality has less to do with income than with inheritance, the organisers concluded. To everyone's surprise, the city administration quickly took a liking to the project and immediately made 20,000 square metres available. This started a commoning dynamics in which all residents were invited to come up with ideas for (re) designing the urban space. So, in this project the people of Mechelen take the lead. This means that they are sketching the future image of the city. Arsenaal and the museum collected all the proposals, brought the ideas and the people behind them together, organised negotiations, meetings and debates to discuss the plans, and provided a large underground park, an exhibition designed by scenographer Jozef Wouters and Barry Ahmad Talib. In this 'Neverending Park' the eighty proposals that were selected after a deliberative day of negotiation were exhibited. Each idea was visualised in a scale model, made by the artist Benjamin Verdonck.

As researchers we only looked at the deliberative and agonistic elements of the preparation phase (of which the exhibition is a part). The initial claim by the artist Willy Thomas, who from the Arsenaal demanded a square metre per Mecheler, can certainly be called agonistic. But the positive reaction of the mayor to immediately make 20,000 square metres available soon led him into a deliberative logic. Also, civil servants and politicians were willing to negotiate with citizens and the intention is to realise at least some of the proposals in collaboration with the city services. One proposal was even immediately realised, as it was highly feasible. One point of attention that remains is: who are the citizens that come to negotiate around the proposals? Are they not again mainly the white, empowered, and skilled middle-class people who feel at home in a deliberative model?

The initiators therefore, on a caravan bicycle, consciously visited the more disenfranchised neighbourhoods, the care centres and charity organisations. This tour resulted, among other things, in the project 'Unheard'. It was a platform for the voices of people who have the feeling that they are not being heard. This 'chair' has meanwhile been realised and has become the subject of a two-year process, in collaboration with a charity organisation, in which the chair will tour Mechelen to collect all those unheard voices.

Still, it remains difficult to reach subaltern groups, the organisers freely admitted. Many of the proposals did however focus on ideas to benefit people without voices, ranging from inserting low stimulus pauses, at events for those who cannot tolerate the level of sound and lights, to a project where pet owners (who can't afford a vet), can obtain free consults for their sick animals. Other examples were road signs listing the countries of origin of all Mechelen residents in recognition of the various cultures in the city, improving pathways for wheelchair users and even a 'throwaway fridge' where food can be placed for residents who have nothing to eat. The project is deliberative as it organises debates and negotiation rounds and perhaps therefore mainly attracts a white middle class but those same people—also because of encouragement by the organisers—do feel challenged to submit proposals, on behalf of and to the benefit of, citizens who usually are less seen and heard. By transforming these proposals into images and showing these in a large exhibition space that by its very design invites people to roam, meet people, and engage in conversation, the image, the doing and the experiencing are added to the deliberative process. In other words, the deliberative process results in concrete projects and in 'doing' so, that agonistic proposals can be realised.

In this 'The Ground of Things' is different from projects such as the participatory budgeting in Antwerp or Ghent, which are often managed by the government within a representative logic. 'The Ground of Things', by contrast, was initiated and completely organised by two cultural organisations. The local government in no way interfered with the content but did take an interest. The council member for Culture even spent a few nights in the park to talk with visitors and familiarise himself with the various ideas. Civil servants too came to the Neverending Park to learn about everything that

concerns the people of Mechelen who participate in the project. In the final phase, the negotiations will start with them and the local government about the realisation of the plans that surfaced in the deliberative process. And that's when it becomes exciting: eventually, it is still the government that decides whether plans will go through or not and in what form. Then it will become clear in how far the commoning politics will succeed and in how far 'The Ground of Things' can penetrate from the fictional space of the exhibition into the real urban fabric. The 'Neverending Park' was mainly, both literally and figuratively, a space of imagination in a museum, where everything can still be dreamt and said. As soon as the city makes good on its promise to execute the plans, the distinction will be gone and it will turn out that the imagination can really shape the city and with it, society. Agonistic voices then find their way within a representative order through an artistic and deliberative mediation.

CULTURE AS A CRITICAL ALLY

In all three art projects artists and cultural organisations proposed an urban common, in which a communal resource—a public square, language and public ground, respectively—were to be managed, organised, and (re)produced by residents. The 'success' of this turned out to depend on the interplay between the stakeholders and the forms of participation they represent. But even more important, was local government accepting and recognising other forms of participation than just that of a representative democracy. As all three projects showed, the government can quite easily lock up the agonistic movements of the artist in the realm of fiction.

Thus, *Montaña Verde* remained part of the 'Experience Traps' exhibition and was constantly held in that fictional space, by avoiding the deliberation between the agonistic moves of *Recetas Urbanas* and the representative democracy. The *Tower of Babel*, since it was built on private property, was able to completely avoid the representatives of representative democracy, thereby creating the freedom to thematise multilingualism in an agonistic move. But the distance to the government simply remained too large: agony was permitted within the poetic and artistic licence, but remained far from the politically charged debate on multilingualism. The poet Vanhauwaert, by the way, has on many occasions publicly declared that she does not wish to make political art, which is quite different from the case of 'The Ground of Things', where the dialogue with politicians and civil servants is deliberately entertained. For now, it seems like the city is willing to allow an agonistic participation through deliberation. It would be a first, that a city allows commoning politics and that the local government acts as a facilitator. Artists, as critical allies, can play a meaningful role in this because they of all people are capable of bringing out the voices of those who cannot speak or who are not being heard. By imagining, performing, expressing, playing, they expand the possibilities of making, planting, building, creating together. In short, of *doing* democracy.

This chapter was published before in F. Dupin-Meynard & E. Négrier (Eds.) (2019). *Cultural Policies in Europe: A Participatory Turn?* Editions de l'Attribut, under the title 'Commoning art as political companion. On the issue of participatory democracy.'

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