

# NOTES ON CITIZENSHIP

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iLIANA FOKIANAKI I would like to start with the fact that through the institution's decision to focus more on the city, we have begun to look at the city as our main focal subject. I began wondering whether cities actually exist anymore, or whether the State designates the confines and policies of a city and imagines it through its bureaucratic "gaze", covering vast areas of land and creating offices, roads, traffic lights, cul-de-sacs etc. that it then calls "cities". I was trying to grasp what a "city" might mean or be in 2017, and whether in fact what we know as cities today are just vessels for other structures. I tried to look into the notion of the city now becoming obsolete, since we live secluded in our own microcosms, our own small neighbourhoods, and interact with our "clans", or our online worlds of people that act alike, think alike or "Like" alike online – without actually ever knowing or grasping the greater limits of the cities that we inhabit. This line of thinking immediately took me back to the dystopian/utopian novels and films of my childhood, where architectural descriptions of structures in fact gave outlines to the city in my imagination, but the only way I could grasp the notion of the city as something tangible was through the personal stories of the characters in my childhood books, who were its citizens. It reminded me of a volume by Verso that was recently published, where Thomas Moore's 'Utopia' is revisited in essays by writ-

ers Ursula Le Guin and China Mieville. Le Guin states that *“every utopia since Utopia has also been, clearly or obscurely, actually or possibly, in the author’s or in the reader’s judgment, both a good place and a bad one. Every utopia contains a dystopia”*<sup>1</sup>. And it reinforces my realization of the impossibility of the single city, as opposed to the co-existence of myriads of cities within a city in accordance with our perceptions and understanding. People make and define cities; cities are constructed through our lives. And somehow, my initial reaction to the programming of this institution and subsequently to its first exhibition was to primarily direct myself in between the grander scale and the smaller scale, the interchange of the imagining of the state of what the city is and the citizen’s imagining of what it is.

ANTONIA ALAMPI I think that our interests really met in wanting to look at the social fabric of the city, at the people who inhabit them. For example, I was particularly fascinated by the diverse population that characterizes the city of Antwerp, which is paradigmatic of many others in continental (former) colonial Europe, including Berlin, where I live. Also because I am Italian and come from Calabria, a region with a high density of emigrants, and am an immigrant myself in Germany, it was interesting to look at the waves of migration to Belgium. As Dirk Geldof<sup>2</sup> writes, Italians, in addition to Poles and Czechs, were among the first to come here as from the 1930s as guest workers in the coal mines, followed by Greeks, Spanish and Portuguese and then Moroccans and Turks during the rich years between 1945 and the first oil crises of 1973. However, since the nineties (for obvious reasons: the fall of the Berlin Wall, globalization

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Moore, (2016), ‘Utopia’, with introduction by China Mieville and essays by Ursula K. Le Guin, Verso, p.233

<sup>2</sup> See Dirk Geldof, (2016), ‘Super Diversity in the Heart of Europe’, Acco, Leuven.

and the growing economic disparity that came with it, the Gulf War and the war in Yugoslavia, and the European Union's free movement of labour) Belgian urban settings have reached an unprecedented diversity. In a city like Antwerp, almost half of the population (49%) has a migration background, from all over the globe (the highest percentage of migrants come from other European countries). In a recent interview on *The Other Journal*<sup>3</sup>, Judith Butler pointed out the importance of asking "*on what conditions do we live together, and what kinds of obligations bind us to one another and to the polities in which we live?*". And this is one of the questions I find relevant to pose.

But also to respond to what you said about the city being its citizens, I think it is important to mention that what I am particularly interested in addressing is also what parameters we use to define who is entitled to be a citizen, and on which premises (from legality, via economy, to morals and ethics) those parameters are still in place. I think that if we really want to understand or grasp the city, we also need to look into its non-registered and non-legal hidden corners. And this is a subject that a work like Ahmet Ögüt's 'Center for Urban Citizens', which we commissioned and which will reside here for the next three years, directly engages with; questioning and stretching what the definition of a citizen might be, particularly from the vantage point of progressive movements that started in cities, microcosms that might be easier to manage, organize, read, but also to act upon.

MICHIEL VANDEVELDE      I am interested in the language, the notions, definitions and the dominant ideology that defines cities and citizenship in the

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler & Stephanie Berbec, (26th of June 2017), *The Other Journal*, 'WE ARE WORLDLESS WITHOUT ONE ANOTHER', <https://the-otherjournal.com/2017/06/26/worldless-without-one-another-interview-judith-butler/>

west. You rightly describe the enormous cultural diversity of today's Europe, and the smaller scale: Antwerp, as a result of different migration processes. Now, what interests me is how to contest the dominant cultural understanding of the organization of cities, or more specifically: of citizenship, after, one might say, "super-diversification".

I think the struggle – and this is where a space like Extra City has a role to play – is to contest the ontology of liberal democracy, of citizenship defined through a liberal understanding of the term. Liberalism implies "openness", yet there is very little openness to be found towards what is "different", towards what is "other". Liberal values have concrete borders, the borders of administrative offices, of Europe, and so on. The mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion are both subtle and obviously visible, but we like to feign ignorance of these mechanisms. It is more comfortable to act as if we don't know. I hope that the least we can do, that art can do, is to lay these mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion bare, not only through the artists we invite, and through the artworks they create, but also through a critical attitude towards ourselves: because we can't solely address critically other public institutions or structures without critically examining and laying bare the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, the relations of power, that we ourselves install. I hope that the fact that we work as a kind of loose collective will allow for internal criticality towards each other, but also the creation of a citizens council, existing of around 30 people, living in Antwerp, with different backgrounds, might create the possibility of critical awareness around how Extra City is being run and who is (unconsciously) "allowed" to enter and who is not.

IF To pick up on that, the problem with liberalism is not its frontiers, but rather the hundreds of borders within its frontiers, that still marginalize and separate citizens among themselves. Since the 1980s, the so-called democracies of the Western world advocated a state that demands a lot from its citizens and offers less every time, and this has actually fortified the internal borders we are discussing, creating divisions. Little has changed since Hannah Arendt's writings, in which she names the stateless as the ones deprived of the right to have rights, and little has changed since Spivak's reading of Arendt, which leads us to today's globalization: the deficient form of the nation state in the modern period allowed for the neoliberal state in the late twentieth century. One that we see currently implementing its powers, with even more force; thus these internal borders are now magnified. Where does art stand in all this? How much actual effect can art have in a globalized capitalist era? The recent article by JJ Charlesworth, 'The end of the Biennial'<sup>4</sup>, is a good example of naming the big conundrums of our practices. Art institutions remain institutions of power. However, they also function as a mirror of society that supposedly reflects today's issues through a cultural language. And subsequently, it is important to look into the utterances of this language: how power structures are defined and communicated in an institution, but also to acknowledge *by whom* they are defined. What could be more efficient than to focus on the local context in order to see in real time how these power structures are set and how these languages uttered. Therefore, the fact we have chosen to focus on citizenship through the viewpoint of Antwerp with all its idiosyncrasies and the super-diversity that you both mention, might present interesting questions for cultural practices. We are trying

<sup>4</sup> JJ Charlesworth, (July 17th 2017), Art review online, [https://artreview.com/opinion/opinion\\_online\\_jj\\_charlesworth\\_the\\_end\\_of\\_the\\_biennial/](https://artreview.com/opinion/opinion_online_jj_charlesworth_the_end_of_the_biennial/)

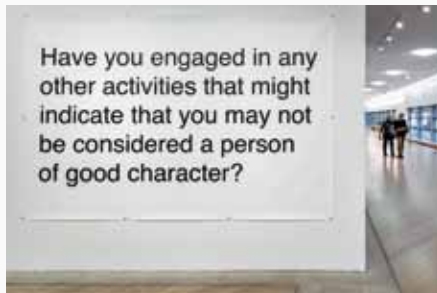
to change the rigid structure of an institution, working all together, a curatorial team, director and staff diverse in culture and gender: our polyphony will hopefully generate aspects of cultural practice that many institutions lack. And we do this with the direct and constant input of an Extra City council that is composed of people for the most part not with a background in the arts, but who are, rather, related to our research, ranging from diversity consultants, activists in social movements, to urban planners working on democratizing public space. I think that it is a good start to actually turn the institution inside out, so that the citizen-visitor sees its “insides”: its mechanisms, functions and thinking processes, and therefore be able to address its practice directly. It is an experiment in power structure systems. I also see this through the works in the exhibition: Antonis Pittas brings the neighbourhood into the institution quite literally, by presenting parts of the homes of Antwerp’s citizens as artworks in Extra City.

AA In the spirit of self-criticism that Michiel called for, I don’t think we are that diverse as a team, given that we are all white middle-class Europeans and all of the people (except for one) on a salary at Extra City as an institution, are Flemish. On the other hand, for the first time in the institution’s history, its director is a woman, and women are actually part of the artistic team, which is certainly an achievement we should acknowledge.

On the note about the frontiers within frontiers, I want to quote Stephan Lessenich, who said: *“strictly speaking, citizenship is what economists call a “club good”. Club goods are defined by reflecting artificial scarcity: in principle, the access to these goods could be open to all, but it is arbitrarily circumscribed to and*

*monopolized by a particular group of people.*”<sup>5</sup> This relates again to the fictional openness of liberalism and our European democracies, which are fundamentally based, as Lessenich argues, on externalizing exploitation (of land, of labour, etc.). In essence, our privileges as European citizens are also based on the violent exploitation of the resources of others elsewhere. Who, in turn, are not allowed to access “our” nations and with whom we don’t want to share our rights.

<sup>5</sup> Stephan Lessenich, (2016), ‘The Open Society and Its Contradictions: Towards a Critical Sociology of Global Inequalities’, lecture.



I think the series of works included in our opening exhibition, by Meriç Algün, a Turkish artist with Swedish citizenship, and entitled ‘Becoming European’, speaks incisively of what type of man-made barriers have been erected, or how unequal a notion such as mobility is. In works that emerge from her own experience, she highlights what one has to do and how one has to think in order to be given the entrance ticket to this thing called European citizenship.

While in the same show, but at the other end of the spectrum, James Bridle presents ‘Citizen Ex’ – an artwork consisting mainly of a downloadable plug-in that produces an algorithmic citizenship spanning multiple jurisdictions and national borders that is based on our movements on the internet, showing us where we go on the web, and what that means. The work shows

↑ Meriç Algün, ‘Billboards’, (2012), series of billboards, print on PVC with grommets, 3x2m each Exhibition view: ‘Becoming European’, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2014  
Photo: Åsa Lundén  
Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Nordenhake & Moderna Museet, Stockholm

what terrains new technologies and the internet open. Would a global citizenship such as an algorithmic one actually be possible? What commitments would it entail? And what responsibilities? Engin Isin and Bryan Turner<sup>6</sup> trace the difference between liberal and cultural theories of citizenship. In essence they write about how in the first the role of the state is rather utilitarian, facilitating the construction of an individual that can be placed on the market and whose “happiness” is measured in relation to individual wealth. The second is based on what is defined as “virtue”, meaning in the construction of an autonomous and thinking individual, an active agent within a community, that engages in, and has the intellectual and practical tools to engage in, political participation. From there, they bring the reader into thinking how in order to even think of something such as a cosmopolitan or global citizenship, we would need to fundamentally re-evaluate precisely this notion of virtue that is being increasingly eroded by neoliberal governance. Lina Attalah also looks into this through her text in this reader. Amongst personal experiences between Egypt, Palestine and Iran Lina Attalah speaks of possible forms, or the need thereof, of active citizenship. One of these is Mada Masr, a platform for independent and progressive journalism she co-founded in Egypt, which keeps existing and speaking out loud in two languages (Arabic and English) against state repression and censorship.

<sup>6</sup> Engin F. Isin and Bryan S. Turner (eds.), (2002), ‘Handbook of Citizenship Studies’, Sage.

MV The two different approaches to citizenship you mention are interesting to me. The liberal “individual” versus the cultural “active agent within a community”. I haven’t read the book you refer to, so I might go in a different direction here. I have to think about a few things.





First of all about the individualization of political struggles and of activism. Political disobedience is for me an important part of taking up your role as citizen. In our liberal Western democracies a lot of groups, a lot of individuals, have gained more and more rights. Which is a very good thing. Yet, at the same time it has dispersed political action in many different directions, and to smaller subgroups. It seems difficult today to unite. To come together.

I have to think about what Adam Curtis says in an interview: *“I thought the one image that really summed it up for me was the photograph of the protest outside Trump Tower. I think it was two days after the election, and there was a girl holding up a poster that said, “I just feel so sad.” And I thought, “Well, that’s not enough”. I’m so sorry, because, you know, we have gotten to this point that is brilliant – where we are all allowed to express ourselves. Fifty years ago, we weren’t allowed to do that, so it’s great. That’s about feminism, that’s about gay rights, that’s about all the good things we’ve done. But at the same time we’ve gotten locked off into the individualism that is at the heart of that. What we’ve got to recapture, somehow, is the idea – and this is the real key thing for politics in the future – of allowing people to feel that they are individuals, with rights, and that*

↑ James Bridle, (2015), ‘Algorithmic citizenships based on browsing behaviour’, from ‘Citizen Ex’

*they desire to do what they want to do, but also feel that they can give themselves up to something bigger. Squaring that circle is going to be the future of politics on the left. Someone's got to find a way of doing it."*

So, I think it is about contesting structures of power *together*, no matter who has the power, right or left, because these divisions don't really count anymore today. It is about realizing that being an "active agent within a community" is about a community without any identity. And that's where it becomes difficult but interesting. To learn to think outside of identity, and finally leave identity politics behind us.

In that sense, I think Anton Jäger's piece in the *cahier* is very interesting. Because he re-introduces the term "class". A lot of people tend to avoid that term nowadays, for various reasons: it is a too "leftist" term, or "there are no classes anymore", etc. Maybe the classes have changed, but class has not gone, different social statuses still exist. The struggle here is about power. And it doesn't unite people based on their cultural identity, but based on social inequality. I think it is very necessary today to dare to use this notion of class.

IF To answer Antonia and Michiel together. In terms of how diverse we are I actually disagree and think we are quite diverse in many of our identities. (class, national, gender identity etc.) More specifically, the term "white" and "European" can be very different for a citizen of Portugal or Greece and for a Belgian or French citizen. In financial terms, we are talking about "a Europe of two gears" referring

to growth numbers that are very different, when comparing the rich north and the poor south. And we need to mention that the colour of one's skin, albeit the pale colour of one's skin, does not always guarantee superiority or advantage, although in most cases it does. And here comes class identity, national identity and the financial condition of the nationState that reconfigures the terms "white" and "European". And I think that Victoria Ivanova's text in this cahier, is addressing directly the greater picture of identity in terms of class identification systems, that are in turn defined by national identity -and the economic wealth of individuals belonging to countries and geographies. Therefore citizenship can be an asset. To go back to Antonia's comments, of course in terms of the art world these geographies and class identities are also existent. The art world in general is thought to consist of middle-class individuals and this in itself poses questions in regards to the ability we have to actually "influence" societal changes and shifts. I think Sven Lütticken put it quite succinctly by saying that *"any artistic or intellectual critique must be self-critique. The structural cultural revolution has created a mobile international quasi-class whose complicity with what it actually claims to oppose ... is blatantly obvious. We too are part of the problem"*.<sup>7</sup>

So, very crucial points have been made here in terms of national identity and class identity. I tackle them in my research and I really do struggle with these terms, especially after the extreme surge of identity politics in the 90s. But I think it can be very dangerous to abandon identity politics completely, since this is exactly what many EU parties used as an argument and

<sup>7</sup> Sven Lütticken, (2017), 'Cultural Revolution: Aesthetic Practice after Autonomy', Berlin, Sternberg Press, p. 181.

they in turn allowed (unconsciously?) the identitarian extreme right to emerge, of course with the help of the financial crisis. We only need to look at the neighbours of Belgium, the Netherlands and France with the examples of politicians such as Wilders and Le Pen, respectively. Identity politics use this idea of “us versus them” and this has proven to be extremely problematic and polarizing when used by the wrong ideologies.

The failure of the left has been either the complete abandonment of class politics in some cases, or the questions they raise on class politics, questions which are wrong in my opinion, or to phrase it better they are not wrong, but they lack a contemporary approach and relevance. But as you say, Michiel, we might have had new formations of class today, but this has not abolished class by any means. Indeed, the second stage of capitalism has allowed for citizens to move from one class to another: look at the baby boomers of the nineties, “from rags to riches” examples of tycoons from the 80s onwards, the CEOs of Wall Street etc. and then look at Guy Standing’s recent analysis of the dangerous new class, The Precariat<sup>8</sup>, which is a sort of an inverse mirror image: citizens suddenly in a precarious financial state, one that unites them into one new classification which he names “the precariat”. Now what is important here, to link back to Antonia’s initial reference to Judith Butler, is to see what it is that actually unites us and under what premises this unification and common struggle – or resistance as Michiel writes – occurs. It’s what Tariq Ramadan proposes as “*the sharing of the common rather than the integration of differences*”,<sup>9</sup> and the core of it is to create alliances that have a true base, that steer clear of identity-based ideolo-

<sup>8</sup> Guy Standing, (2011), ‘The Precariat: the new dangerous class’, Bloomsbury Academic.

<sup>9</sup> Tariq Ramadan, (2011), ‘On Super-diversity’, Witte de With with Sternberg Press.

gies, but that give birth to what I have proposed in recent texts as a “neo-identitarian” world that is yet to come.<sup>10</sup> One that speaks a new language – to return to language whose importance we discussed previously – one that abandons the established lexicon of power dichotomies, one that forms new constructions of power. And art has the agency to actually propose scenarios for these new citizens to think and act themselves into existence.

<sup>10</sup> I am using here this term of “neo-identitarianism” as a concept in progress, I urge our readers to treat it as such since it is part of a current research, and I hope through the work at Extra City to be able to develop it more concretely via our programming the next years.

