

RESEARCH REPORT

Gentrify Everything: New Forms of Critical Artistic Agency

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Introduction

This article aims to contextualize and critically evaluate a curatorial project titled BORG, a biennial event for contemporary art in the city of Antwerp, Belgium. The second edition took place in September 2016 and was themed around the topic of gentrification. Together with a brief account of the sociopolitical context and the chosen curatorial approach, we will look at how biennials operate on both a local and global level, provoking the question of the public: *who is it for?* This will in turn lead to a question of agency: *what is to be done?* Which critical strategies can be developed vis-à-vis neoliberal gentrification processes and how do artists enter the picture? From thereon, we will develop a more critical understanding of cynicism and over-identification, and illustrate how these mechanisms are at work in Renzo Martens' project *The Institute of Human Activities* as 'reversed gentrification'. Finally, we will have a look at some of the projects that were part of BORG 2016.

Borgerhout: from Borgerocco to Boho

BORG is a biennial event for contemporary art that I co-founded in 2014, in the district of Borgerhout, Antwerp.¹ It is an experimental attempt at developing a biennial format on a local urban scale, while working with precarious financial means assigned by the city district council. The selection of participants (artists, architects, performers and theorists alike) is done by a professional jury from the outcome of an open call. The first edition in 2014 was not assigned any particular theme, as several guest curators² were invited to compose a group show in empty or derelict buildings such as a church, a former post office and a former call center. For the second edition in 2016, gentrification was put forward as a central theme (cf. *infra*). Initially BORG grew out of the desire to create a platform that would reflect the increased artistic presence in the city district over the past decade. While the adjective 'biennial' merely refers to its two-yearly activities, as an apparatus the art biennial deals with much more than a temporal indication. The biennial boom of the past two decades³ is a global, post-institutional phenomenon that is significantly dependent on city marketing ideologies and budgets (Gielen 2009). Political by nature, biennials are deeply intertwined with the reconfiguration of both time and space⁴. With the Venice Biennale as its oldest example (est. 1895), they are a curious and complex case of interconnected flows on a local and global level (of people, ideas, money, art works, commodities, etc.). For that reason, each biennial faces the challenge to develop a 'politics of translation' (Sheikh 69) or diplomatic negotiation between these two movements. An often-heard reproach is that such events hardly reach out to or lack meaningful connections with the 'local' audience and environment. Curator Simon Sheikh refutes this criticism by emphasizing the biennial's potential to create new, hybrid public formations that are neither bound to the nation-state nor to the art world. Speaking of

¹ The co-founders of BORG are Benny Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx, Bart Vanderbiesen, Pieter Vermeulen and Bart Verschuereen, further referred to in the first person plural.

² Three curatorial duos were invited, each combining a visual artist/designer and a curator: Nico Dockx & Evelien Bracke, Ward Heirwegh & Thomas Caron and Kasper Bosmans & Samuel Saelemakers.

³ An extensive survey of the global phenomenon of art biennials can be found in Van Hal et al. 2010.

⁴ We find this reflected in Manfred Steger's definition of globalization as "the expansion and intensification of social relations and consciousness across world-time and world-space" (Steger 2009: 18)



Figure 1: Visual campaign for BORG 2016, developed by design studio Vrints-Kolsteren. Credits: Ninja Photography.

'the local', then, is based on the false premise that "social relations and identities in a specific context are given and whole, if not holy, that the local audience is a singular group with essential qualities and shared agencies" (Sheikh 73). The lure of the local, Sheikh states, should meet the glamour of the global. Understanding the dialectics between the two, then, is a first step to their deconstruction. If the oxymoronic label 'local biennial' is to mean anything at all, it will have to depend on the way in which the politics of translation take shape on a 'glocal' level. This is also what is at stake with BORG, which is why it is worth expanding on the local context here.

The city district of Borgerhout in Antwerp has suffered a rather bad public and media reputation for decades, often pejoratively dubbed Borgerocco due to its large number of inhabitants of Moroccan descent. As such it has been an easy target of popular prejudice and right-wing political movements looking to scapegoat particular ethnic communities. In recent years, however, this perception has gradually shifted. In the past fifteen years, numerous artists (and other so-called "young urban creatives") have moved into the district with young, predominantly white middle-class families, couples and singles in their wake. An increasing number of professional artists set up their studios in Borgerhout as galleries, project spaces and artist initiatives started burgeoning, an evolution that has continued until today. Strikingly, Antwerp's most internationally established gallery Zeno X also decided to relocate to the neighborhood in 2014. With a rise in the number of fashionable parties, ecologically minded community initiatives and coffee bars where

the word 'coffee' isn't even pronounced, the district has by now become *salonfähig* for the – again, mostly white and young – middle class. The latter is gradually replacing the working class, with hipsters taking the place of long-time locals or musty tobacco stores closing their doors in favor of retro barber- and tattoo shops. In this respect it is telling that those same 'newcomers' in Borgerhout have recently 'rebranded' the neighborhood under the name Boho, similar to Manhattan's ultra-gentrified art district Soho. Indeed, most ingredients of a classical gentrification recipe seem to be present here, together with the role of the so-called 'creative class' in it.⁵ The reasons for and desirability of the transformation from Borgerocco into Boho are a matter of ideological framing and hence exactly what is at stake in the gentrification scenario.⁶ In the case of Borgerhout, however, this urban transformation is predominantly the outcome of an informal, bottom-up evolution rather than the product of an aggressive, top-down form of city marketing. Gentrification in Antwerp unfolds at a much slower pace than in cities like New York, Berlin, London, Tokyo, Hong Kong or São Paulo.⁷ The property values in the area have still not soared to excessive heights and the percentage of residents active in the so-called creative industries is relatively negligible. Cultural diversity in Borgerhout has its roots in social and ethnic stratification. It is not our ambition here to find a satisfactory explanation for this segregation, although it does confront us with the pressing question: *who is it for?*

The question 'who is it for?'⁸ should not be taken lightly, especially for a biennial event that claims to operate on a local level. Evaluating the previous edition of 2014, visitor profiles proved to be rather homogeneous in terms of age, social and ethnic background. One way to take this concern seriously is to opt for more diverse local involvement at an early stage of creation, as often happens with practices of participatory art, community art and forms of 'artivism'.⁹ In order to bring about actual change, however, activism and other forms of political engagement will prove to be much more effective.¹⁰ In the hitherto discussed case, this would imply standing up for the victims of gentrification and preventing the displacement of residents, defending their right to housing, affordable living and so on.¹¹ However, this was not the curatorial path chosen for the second edition of BORG, out of an unwillingness to function as "the idealist in the machine", patiently and tirelessly ironing out the rough edges of the system" (BAVO 2007a: 28). This requires a degree of "necessary inefficiency" (Shaviro 2013). Instead, the focus was rather self-oriented, reflecting on the complicity of contemporary artists and art workers in the process of gentrification.

Gentrify everything

In the spring of 2016, an open call was launched under the provocative slogan *GENTRIFY EVERYTHING*. A manifesto was also published on the website as a source of artistic and theoretical inspiration.¹² The tagline, a vague echo the 'Occupy Everything' movement, was then converted to a publicity campaign consisting of red stickers, packing tape carrying the slogan, flyers and posters. This 'campaign material' was distributed throughout the city in authorized and less authorized places. The exhibition venues, all located within a perimeter of only a few kilometers, were selected accordingly: a former sheltered

⁵ This term has initially been coined and theorized by economist and social scientist Richard Florida throughout a number of books: *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), *Cities and the Creative Class* (2004) and *The Flight of the Creative Class* (2007). His conception of the 'creative class' has been

⁶ This has led to the term 'gentrification of gentrification': "The displacement of People of Color from the story of gentrification. On top of gentrification itself, it tells people who are living in those neighborhoods, that the story of gentrification isn't even for you." (<http://www.dothewhitething.com/gentrification-of-gentrification/>)

⁷ Saskia Sassen has coined the well-known term 'global city' to refer to those places where urban decision-making, business, marketing, infrastructure etc. are largely intertwined with a global economic regime. See Sassen 1991. See also Lesage 2007.

⁸ This question was also central in the activities of artist collective Group Material in the 1980s and 1990s, as one co-founder Doug Ashford explains: "So when Group Material asked, "How is culture made and who is it for?", we were asking for something greater than simply a larger piece of the art world's real estate. We were asking for the relationships to change between those who depict the world and those who consume it" (<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0910/ashford/en>)

⁹ See De Bruyne & Gielen (2011).

¹⁰ These issues have been extensively dealt with by Bishop (2012) and De Bruyne & Gielen (2011).

¹¹ These events are regularly reported upon by the media worldwide. To cite but a few recent examples: 'Shoreditch Cereal Killer Cafe targeted in anti-gentrification protests' (Khomami & Halliday 2015), 'Check Out How These Bushwick Natives Are Protesting Hipster-Led Gentrification' (Connor 2015), 'Activists in LA's Boyle Heights Serve Galleries with Eviction Notices' (Stromberg 2016).

¹² "Envision a place in which contemporary art is truly everywhere – no escape. Just dream of bohemia lurking around every corner, of all cafés serving your favorite latte, of daily life as one single breath-taking performance. Imagine your city permanently undergoing cosmetic and plastic surgery, with all of its imperfections removed. Instead of slowing down the process of urban development, we call for acceleration. Why limit down when we can have everything? Why settle for less? And even if our demand is too absolute, let it at least ignite the minds of artists, performers, designers, architects, writers and thinkers. Let's gentrify everything!" (www.borg2016.be)



Figure 2: Peter Sattler & Kristinn Guðmundsson (*(A)roma*)/*nice/A roadtrip on an organic, dark brown stream of consciousness or what is the value of hanging out*, Multimedia installation/performance, duration 30 min, 2016. Credits: Ninja Photography.

workshop-slash-children's indoor playground that was soon to be converted into an Aldi department store, a sociocultural meeting center and a carwash turned into a theatre. Aside from the exhibitions and performances that were organized in these venues, there was also a discursive program that offered a more theoretical reflection on these issues.

As such, calling for a gentrification of everything obviously sounds absurd. Not only for ethical reasons, but even more since it short-circuits its own demand. If gentrification comes down to a new form of colonialism, as often said, it is to be based on domination, capital, privilege, hegemony and hence on mechanisms of exclusion, separation and segregation. A plea for ubiquitous gentrification, then, would magnify the ruthless neoliberal capitalist logic and confront it with the impossibility to fully meet this demand. This dialectical swing is where utopian rhetoric meets dystopian reality. Moreover, those 'creatives' who are often deemed to be complicit in the process, are now required to make their role even more explicit. Let us have a look at few examples.

Performance duo Peter Sattler & Kristinn Guðmundsson decided to operate as 'metabaristas' in a self-designed and self-employed coffee bar that functioned as a performance stage. Their preceding research in Java, Indonesia, revolved around *kopi luwak*, which is considered to be the most expensive coffee in the world. Through performances and personal encounters with visitors, they were using the myths surrounding this product as a kind of McGuffin¹³ to talk about the speculative value of art and their economically precarious position as artists. Significantly, they insisted on being contracted by the organization as invigilators of the same venue they inhabited over the course of the exhibition.

In a similar way, artist collective Sorry Sorry established its own ice-cream parlor as a cynical reaction to the increasing political demand for the economic self-sufficiency of artists. Berlin-based artist Ina Wudtke presented a video titled *Swing Lesson* (after Adrian Piper's *Funk Lessons*), for which she invited a dancer to create a lindy hop choreography to *The Fine Art of Living*, Wudtke's own electronic swing song about gentrification in Berlin, and then taught the dance to an audience in the famous ballroom *Clärchens Ballhaus*.

¹³ Coined by Alfred Hitchcock, a McGuffin stand for an object in a plot that is desired and pursued by the protagonist but has very little further explanation within the story.



Figure 3: Sorry Sorry *The Belly Ice Cream Parlour* Mixed media installation, 2016. Credits: Ninja Photography.

As a more gastronomic comment on gentrification, Ramon Pino Hernandez mobilized a community of local inhabitants to develop a dedicated, brand new 'Borgerhout sauce' for French fries that would reflect the ethnic diversity of the neighborhood.

Artist duo Vesna Faassen and Lukas Verdijk approached a number of local inhabitants and interviewed them about the gentrification process taking place around them. The participants were then asked to recount each other's personal stories and reactions, played to them through headphones, in front of the camera. The result is alienating, turning the participants into characters acting out each other's identity.



Figure 4: Ramon Pino Hernandez *The Making of the Borgerhout Sauce* (video still) video, 27 min, 2016. Credits: Ramon Pino Hernandez.



Figure 5: Vesna Faassen & Lukas Verdijk, *Untitled* (A work by and with Ali, Arne, Chanel, Lukas and Vesna) (video still) HD video, 2016. Credits: Vesna Faassen & Lukas Verdijk.

To be clear, the demand to 'gentrify everything' is more than just an ironical wink; it is a downright cynical move in search of a critical form of artistic agency. For how exactly does BORG, together with its participating artists, critically engage with the same urban phenomenon that it contributes to as a contemporary art biennial? How to avoid this deadlock and how to deal with the question of artistic complicity?

New forms of agency: cynicism and over-identification

In his brief essay 'New Forms of Agency', curator and critic Lars Bang Larsen (2015) starts off with the following question: 'What is to be done considering art's pervasive commodification and privatization and, perhaps more strongly, why keep doing it?' He identifies two opposite poles of artistic agency today: exit and acceleration. The exit strategy is indebted to 1960s counterculture, when the dropouts of the disciplinary, authoritarian hegemony started looking for other, alternative forms of subjectivity and productivity. These forms of resistance are still present today but seem to be taken less seriously, which presumably has something to do with skeptical doubts concerning the possibility of a radical 'outside'. As Larsen rightfully indicates, "there is no symbolic edifice from which you can walk out". This is what leads a large number of culturati to complain about the all-pervading free-market ideology with few people actually stepping out.¹⁴ How to maintain a critical stance towards a vampire-like spirit of capitalism that, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) have argued, incorporates, assimilates and exploits all forms of artistic and social critique? Core values of our late-capitalist economy such as autonomy, creativity, mobility and flexibility could arguably be interpreted as the result of the accommodation of artistic critique by the new spirit of capitalism. Creativity is not conceived of as a threat but rather assigned a crucial role in our post-Fordist, post-welfare state, in its urban policymaking and city marketing.¹⁵ The popular discourse around the 'creative industries' is exactly what has led many of its critical adversaries to believe that contemporary artists, in line with hipsters, have become the "gentrifying foot soldiers of capitalism" (Pritchard 2016). According to some, these 'creatives' are using their cultural capital to reveal the sites of future investment of financial capital, even if this means they will also eventually be displaced by real estate brokers and project developers. Our problem with this critique is that it falls prey to the same ideology that it attempts to criticize, equating artists with hipsters as workers in the creative industry, in line with Richard Florida's idea of the 'creative class'. It already rules out any possibility of subversion or resistance, reducing artistic agency, as a mode of living, working and thinking, to a mere vanguard of neoliberal capitalism. Additionally and more anecdotally, the hipster, much more than the artist, is a historically contingent label that many academics, writers and journalists already regard as a phenomenon of the past.¹⁶

So what could a critical form of artistic agency look like? Larsen's other form of agency departs not so much from the avant-garde logic of opposition or transgression as from acceleration, advocating an embrace and speeding up of corporate logic as the path to sociopolitical transformation. Accelerationism has its historical roots in Marxist and Nietzschean thought, as well as in the futurists' glorification of speed.¹⁷ According to present-day accelerationist authors¹⁸, there is little sense in a conception of capitalist ideology critique as hitting the emergency brake. They herald radical alienation, further Deleuzo-Guattarian deterritorialization and technological acceleration as the only viable way to radical sociopolitical change. This line of thinking has gained significant popularity over the past few years, remarkably both on the left and right side of the political spectrum. We won't get any further into the exact stakes and implications of the debate here. More relevant in this case is the distinction between accelerationist politics and an accelerationist aesthetic, as made by Steven Shaviro. Eventually, political accelerationism is a plea to make the excesses of neoliberal capitalism even worse, with the implicit hope to go beyond it. *Aesthetic* accelerationism, according

¹⁴ An interesting survey of dropping out in artistic practice is Alexander Koch's exhibition *Gestures of Disappearance*, which was first organized at the gallery of the Art Academy in Leipzig (2002), and later restaged at Bergen Kunsthall in 2015.

¹⁵ The foundations of this ideology were laid by Richard Florida in his bestsellers *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), *Cities and the Creative Class* (2004) and *The Flight of the Creative Class* (2005). Florida's conception of the creative class has highly been contested, mostly for empirical reasons and circular logic. For a sharp critique, see Pasquinelli 2008.

¹⁶ In his clever essay 'What was the hipster?', cultural critic Mark Greif (2016) writes: "the hipster moment did not produce any artists but tattoo artists. (. . .) It did not produce any photographers but snapshot and party photographers (. . .) It did not produce any painters, but graphic designers. It did not yield a great literature, but it made good use of fonts. And hipsterism did not make an avant-garde; it made communities of early adopters." (354)

¹⁷ Some of its initial philosophical ideas were also expressed by Deleuze and Guattari: "Which is the revolutionary path? . . . To withdraw from the world market? . . . Or might it be to go in the opposite direction? To go still further, that is, in the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization? . . . Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to accelerate the process, as Nietzsche put it" (Deleuze and Guattari 1977: 239).

¹⁸ Notable proponents of accelerationism are Nick Land, Nick Srnicek & Alex Williams, Reza Negarestani or the Laboria Cuboniks collective. A erudite compilation of writings about accelerationism has been made by Avanessian & Mackay (2014).

to Shaviro, does not necessarily claim the efficacy of its own operations but it can lead to an “exacerbated awareness of how we are trapped” in a continuous loop of destruction and phoenix-like renewal. As an artistic or aesthetic form of agency, accelerationism can consist of the appropriation of corporate, entrepreneurial language and strategies in order to undermine or subvert them *from within*.¹⁹ This has also been conceived of as ‘over-identification’, a term that is originally derived from Žižek.²⁰ Over-identification moves beyond critique-as-negation and is rooted in an emphatic ‘yes’. It criticizes the system by analyzing its manifest rhetoric and conventions to then turn them into an all too literal copy. In the words of independent collective BAVO, over-identification “entail[s] a refusal of the current blackmail in which artists are offered all kinds of opportunities to make a difference, on the condition that they give up on their desire for radical change” (2007a: 28). While this modus operandi could be accused of being cynical, it actually has the potential to expose the cynicism that is at play in the same system that it attempts to mirror. In the wake of Peter Sloterdijk²¹, philosophers like Paolo Virno²² and Slavoj Žižek have contended that cynicism has even grown into a (post-)ideology spreading over different parts of society. Over-identification is a way to reclaim artistic agency and criticality in the face of this all-pervading cynicism.

Reversed gentrification

Dutch artist Renzo Martens makes use of similar strategies, not only to highlight and question his own position as a (white, male, privileged) artist but equally to instill a sense of unease or discomfort in the spectator. *Episode III – Enjoy Poverty* (2008) was a first, controversial step in this direction, focusing on the ambivalent role of the development industry in Third World countries. Cynically taking on the role of a messianic savior, he travelled through the Congo for two years in order to educate locals in the economic valorization of their poverty as an ‘export product’ to the West. More recently, he founded the Institute of Human Activities (IHA) on a former Unilever plantation in Lusanga, Congo. Together with the plantation workers (united in the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League), it is Martens’s ambition to build a contemporary arts center and, in doing so, to ‘gentrify the jungle’.²³ His much-disputed intention is to build a ‘white cube’ in a ‘black environment’. The artist already commissioned the workers to create self-portraits made out of river clay, which are then 3D-scanned and reproduced into a chocolate bust.²⁴ The chocolate sculptures are exported and sold to the Western art market and shown in galleries or museums, with all profits returning to the plantation workers. Strikingly, the latter actually earn more with their newly assigned creative labor than they did before at the plantation. This is the outcome of what Renzo Martens, as artistic director of the IHA, calls ‘reversed gentrification’. Its aim is to empower the former victims of colonization by making use of the ‘new form of colonialism’ called gentrification. Together with the local inhabitants of Lusanga, Martens even engaged in a Skype conversation with Richard Florida in order to confront him with the IHA and therefore with the hypocrisy and cynicism implied in his influential yet controversial beliefs. Renzo Martens’ practice demonstrates the possibility of a new form of artistic agency that succeeds in breaking the deadlock of exit versus acceleration. He intends to turn an all-pervading, systemic cynicism against itself by making subversive use of an artistic strategy of over-identification.

Conclusion

The ambition to develop an art biennial format on a local scale requires a politics of translation that negotiates between the local and the global, between the artistic and the social. As such, BORG was intended to inaugurate a reflection on the (im)possibility and pertinence of (artistic) criticism in neoliberal, late-capitalist times, and more specifically in relation to gentrification processes. For how to critically approach the complex issue of gentrification from a position that actually contributes to it (an art biennial)? Through its open call, visual identity and artistic program, strategies of accelerationism and over-identification were aesthetically appropriated in search of a new form of agency that would spark controversy and highlight the inevitable hypocrisy and complicity of the art world in the process of gentrification. With

¹⁹ Present-day illustrations of this artistic strategy can be found in the work of e.g. Superflex, The Yes Men and Pilvi Takala.

²⁰ “[A]n ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it . . . For that reason, an ideological edifice can be undermined by a too-literal identification” (Žižek 1997: 21–22). This concept has further been developed by Belgian research collective BAVO (2007a).

²¹ See his 1997 book *Kritik der Zynischen Vernunft*, Suhrkamp Verlag.

²² See his 2004 book *Grammar of the Multitude*. Los Angeles: Colombia University.

²³ In an interview with The Guardian, the artist says “[i]t’ll be the same sort of art you’d see at the Unilever series at Tate Modern” (Jeffries 2014).

²⁴ The busts are produced in Belgium, a country that has turned chocolate into a national symbol due its former colonial rule over the Congo.

the very possibility of an 'outside' or 'exit' being compromised, new subversive or critical *modi operandi* need to be developed that depart not so much from idealism as from cynicism. Ultimately, this calls for a different understanding of criticality, which has been labeled by Irit Rogoff as 'embodied', "living out the very conditions we are trying to analyze and come to terms with. Therefore, criticality, is a state of duality in which one is at one and the same time, both empowered and disempowered, knowing and unknowing" (Rogoff 2006).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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