

Neo-Parades in Times of Terror



by Eugène van Erven, Utrecht University

Without pretending to be an expert on Saint Martin or about parades I propose to present some personal and academic reflections on these phenomena, informed and inflected by my work as a community arts festival organizer and participatory arts scholar.

My involvement with the revamped Utrecht Saint Martin's Parade dates back to 2010, when Rien Sprenger, Margreet Bouwman and I ran the Treaty of Utrecht's community arts lab and helped generate support for - and helped produce - the memorable edition of 11-11-'11. Since then, we have been gradually deepening and broadening our knowledge of parade art, including through exchanges and collaborations with Colombian, Guatemalan, Brazilian and Belgian artists. These international contacts helped confirm what we already instinctively knew: that cultural traditions, particularly those celebrated in public spaces, have enormous potential to enrich contemporary life and address its multiple social and political issues, but *only* if traditions are prepared to evolve along with these developments. Sometimes this potential becomes real and tangible, as we have discovered to our own surprise over the past three years.

Exactly 30 months ago, I wrote the following introduction in a paper proposal for the Performance Studies International conference that was to be held in July 2016 in Melbourne, Australia:

“On Saturday 7 November 2015, during the warmest November month ever recorded in Holland, along with two women, I carried a 9-foot, led-lit, goose, made of wax paper on a frame of willow twigs. We were part of the annual Saint Martin's parade, an age-old tradition that dates back to medieval times and which several organizations have been trying to turn into a much more socially relevant and artistically sound performative event since 2011. On this occasion in November 2015 it attracted close to 5,000 participants. Our bird was one among at least thirty similar oversize lit objects moving through the city of Utrecht in gale conditions, behind the iconic sculpture of Saint Martin on his horse.



Among us were three hundred recently arrived refugees from Syria, the Utrecht-based 'Band Without a Residence Permit', and the Belgian-Moroccan neo-fanfare group Remork and Karkaba. Several members of this extraordinary music ensemble live in the Brussels borough of Molenbeek, the residence of some of the jihadists behind the terrorist attacks that took place in Paris 6 days later.



Underneath the surface of our seemingly innocent, peaceful, moveable, local spectacle - global, ecological, aesthetic, cultural and political concerns intersected. In the coming months I want to analyze these connections, in anticipation of the inevitable confrontation of neo-parades such as ours with a drastic reconfiguration of public space under the threat of terrorism.”

I don't claim to be a clairvoyant, but the timeline and the prediction in this short text unfortunately have turned out to be chillingly accurate. Less than a week after our peaceful and cozy St Martin's Parade in Utrecht on November 7th 2015, 500 km to the south of from here all hell broke loose in Paris. Multiple terrorist attacks there left 130 people dead, many of them in the Bataclan nightclub. Most of the perpetrators were killed or had blown themselves up, but at least one escaped: Saleh Abdeslam.

Over the next few months he moved around from hiding place to hiding place in Belgium and, some say, also in Holland – with the police hot on his heels. On March 18th 2016 he was finally arrested in a house in ... Molenbeek, where he had been hiding for at least several weeks, if not longer. His widely publicized arrest ('We've got him') prompted a sleeping IS cell to immediately come into action.



This cell had originally planned an attack for Easter (27th of March 2016) but - panicked by the unexpected apprehension of their ringleader - three of their suicide bombers decided to get into action a few days earlier than intended. They detonated themselves on March the 22nd: one at Zaventem international airport and another at the Maalbeek metro station in downtown Brussels. Including the 3 terrorists 35 people perished, leaving the Belgian capital traumatized and under curfew for the next couple of weeks. Since then, the entire Muslim community of Molenbeek has been accused of being IS accomplices: by the press, by residents of other neighborhoods, and by the world at large. Intracultural nuances were clearly lost on public opinion and, as all of you well know, after the Trump election and increased media hacks, expanded censorship, and widespread irresponsible use of social media all over the world, this unfortunate trend has only worsened.

A Bit of Theory

The term 'intracultural' is less well known than its semantic cousins inter/cultural and multi/cultural, but is far more productive, I believe. It was coined by Indian theorist Rustom Bharucha in his book *The Politics of Cultural Practice* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 2001, p. 8).

In a webcast I held with him in 2007 as part of the Treaty of Utrecht Community Arts Lab program, Rustom explained it to me as follows:

“**Intraculturalism** is the exchange of local and regional cultures within the framework of the nation. Those differences tend to be taken for granted. Participants may say they have a Dutch or Portuguese identity, but if you scratch the surface a little bit you’d realize they’re Dutch or Portuguese in significantly different ways. It’s those differences I think need a lot more attention. These differences are marked by ethnicity, class, gender, language, sexual orientation and all kinds of other factors that constitute culture.

Multiculturalism [is different from intraculturalism]. It also deals with differences of immigrant culture, but to me it remains primarily a state policy. How does the state deal with immigrants? How are they going to become good citizens? All kinds of strategies have been explored: integration, assimilation, pluralism. **Intraculturalism**, by contrast, is **NOT** working with state agency in mind; it’s about what community artists are actually doing. People who are concerned with the dynamics of community and different communities sharing a particular space. This could be a housing estate in a metropolis or a small town. The intra/cultural works within smaller frameworks or spatial locations. Within that small space there can be many, many differences...”



From Bharucha and from Indian inter-communal violence between Hindus and Muslims I have learned the dangers of being too romantic about **community**. Rustom continues:

“Communities are not wholesome organisms. They contain hierarchies. Within traditional communities in many parts of the world there is often little respect for women, children and alternative sexual orientation. I refuse therefore to uncritically valorise communities, but at the same time they have to be taken very seriously because people identify with them. Me also. Let us accept that identity is made up of several components and depending on the context we find ourselves in, one component or other may be resonant”.

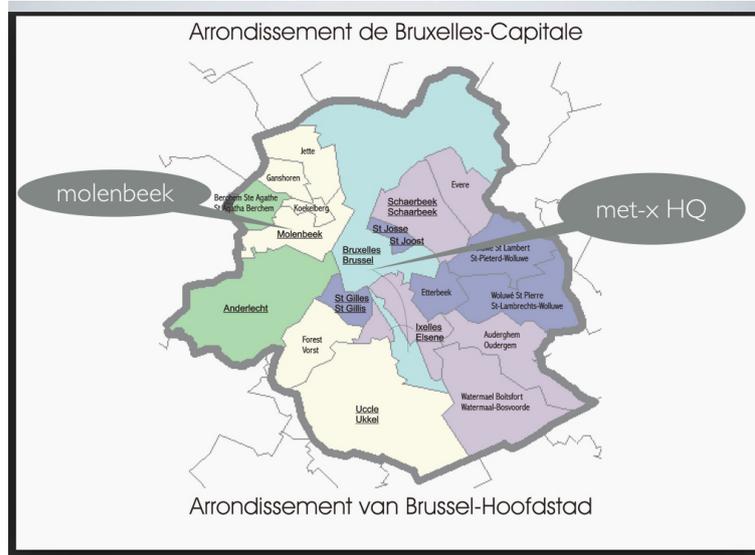
You can read more about this subject in *Politics of Cultural Practice...*

<https://www.amazon.com/Politics-Cultural-Practice-Thinking-Globalization/dp/0819564249>

Let us now return to our main story. I left you with a terrorist on the run in 2016: Saleh Abdeslam

Searching for explanations why Abdeslam was able to elude his pursuers for so long, political scientists and security experts – in the wake of uncontrollable waves of refugees flooding into Europe in 2015-'16 and which have now diminished - have pointed to the peculiar fragmented structure of Brussels. Its

metropolitan area consists of 19 separate municipalities, each with their own separate administration and separate police force with very little, if any, coordination among and between them. Linguistic, political, economic and cultural differences further enhance the impression of an unwieldy and divided city, which also happens to have a very large presence of expats - thanks to the headquarters of the European Union and all manner of other international institutions. But as ineffective as the municipal governing bodies may be on the surface, at the grassroots level fascinating participatory and intra/cultural arts activities show that a more positive reality can be created underneath.



Arguably the most important engine for propelling these activities in Brussels is the organization behind the Zinneke Parade. This biannual event was first produced in the year 2000, when Brussels was cultural capital of Europe.

<https://vimeo.com/2048464>

Welfare State, Bread & Puppet, Brussels and Utrecht

Aesthetically it was inspired by the style of Welfare State International, which in turn had been strongly influenced by the Bread & Puppet theatre. The link between these two is worth dwelling on because it illustrates the often-overlooked importance of international cultural cross-fertilization that certainly also affected the evolution of our own contemporary Saint Martin's Parade in Utrecht. Time for another brief interlude...

This fascinating tale begins in 1934, the year that Peter Schumann was born in Silesia, southern Poland. After World War II and before the iron curtain came down he moved to West Germany to train as a sculptor and dancer. He became passionately interested in the giant puppets of Carnival and took this fascination with him to the US, where he settled with his Russian-American wife and their two kids in 1959. There and then, in Manhattan he founded the legendary Bread & Puppet Theatre, an arts collective that became world famous with its artistic and highly political outdoor parades and street performances. They also toured Europe and in 1966 a young lecturer at the Bradford Arts College saw the Bread & Puppet show FIRE on a street corner in London. His name was John Fox. Soon after this life-changing encounter with Bread & Puppet, John founded Welfare State International, a group that would go on to become one of Europe's premiere site-specific performance groups. It attracted lots of young artists from the continent, including the later founders of Dogtroep from the Netherlands (which would go on to rival Welfare State in terms of spectacular outdoor performances) and the jazz musician Luc Mishalle from Belgium.

There are many more links to be detected, including Bread & Puppet and Dogtroep connecting with Archa theatre in Prague in the 1990s, the establishment of the Allstar Refjudzji Band by Archa but led by former Bread & Puppet musician Michael Romanyshyn, former Dogtroep member Ted van Leeuwen becoming inspired by this example to form his own refugee band in Holland called Orchestre Partout and another former dogtroeper, Peter de Boer, who helped create several community music projects here in Utrecht, which in one way or another have all become part of the Saint Martin's Parade. These include the Fanfare of Fire, Orchestre Bicyclette, the Grey Heads Orchestre and, more indirectly, The Catching Cultures Orchestra.



For a more extended version of this story and how it intersects with Utrecht's Saint Martin's parade I refer to *Community Arts Dialogues*, a book and video package published by the Treaty of Utrecht in 2013.

For today's story it is sufficient to say that Daniel Fox, the son of Welfare State's co-founder John Fox, was one of the leading visual and musical artists of Zinneke 2000. There, he worked closely with Luc Mishalle, the former Welfare State intern and later co-founder of Belgium's music education collective Met-X (De Bruyne 2009).

In 2011 and 2012, Dan Fox came to Utrecht to teach us the originally Japanese technique that he had learned during a visit of Welfare State to a small fishing village in Hokaido. In Utrecht he showed us how to use it to construct our led-lit Saint Martin's sculptures and in subsequent years Luc Mishalle has frequently travelled to Holland as well, to collaborate with our street musicians. Remork and Karkaba and the Fanfakids, a peer-trained group of youngsters in the ages between 7 and 14, have also come to Utrecht. Many of their members are based in Molenbeek or similarly stigmatised parts of Brussels. Both are Met-X projects that originated in Zinneke 2000.

Met-X itself was founded, by Luc Mishalle, in 1982 as an intercultural music ensemble. Later it added intercultural music education to its activities, trying to build a bridge between Flemish fanfare and North-African and sub-Saharan percussion and brass music. Immigrants from those geographical areas (many of

them former Belgian colonies) were increasingly becoming part of Brussel's urban scene and Met-X wanted to collaborate with them.

In 2000, Brussels Cultural Capital of Europe became a turning point for Met-X: the company was commissioned to create and produce the opening ceremony in the central part of the city and, in addition, in the months that followed Luc Mishalle coordinated the northeastern segment of the very first Zinneke Parade. In the same breath, he helped organize the Fanfakids and, over the following fifteen years, many many more community-based intercultural and educational music projects. Not only does Met-X productively blend European and African cultures, it also fluidly moves between professional music concerts on one end of the cultural spectrum and neighbourhood-based participatory artistic social events on the other end. It is an understatement to say that MET-X is an inspiration for us, as it should be for any other European city.

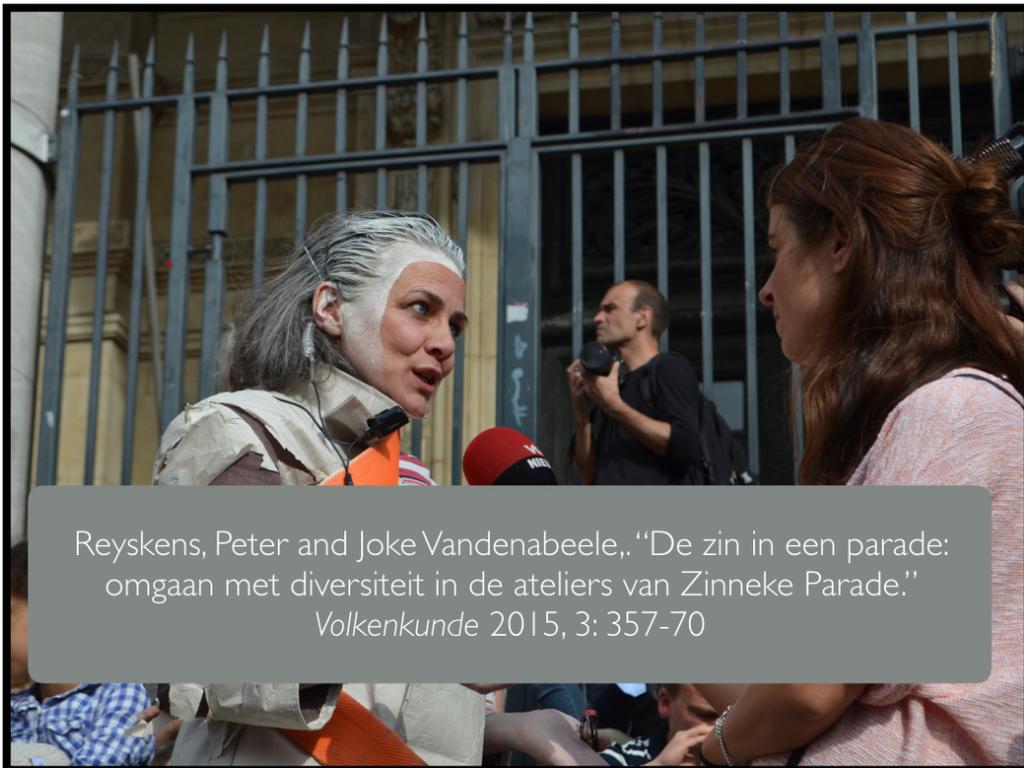


Over the years, Zinneke has become one of the largest, funkier, genuinely inclusive, participatory and artistically impressive, moveable community arts events that I know. Some two and a half thousand school children, homeless, migrants (with or without papers), European civil servants, families, senior citizens, rich, poor, people with various degrees of ability move through the center of Brussels, while anywhere between 50 and 80,000 spectators watch them go by. The participants are organized in so-called 'zinnodes', community groups composed of 100 people who have been selected by a central organization directed by Myriam Stoffen.

Zinnodes are awarded a small subsidy for material expenses and for hiring a professional artist, with whom they work for anywhere between 9 and 18 months in so-called 'ateliers'. These have been called [quote] "small laboratories for community building in diversity" [unquote] by anthropologists Reyskens and Vandenabeele, who documented and analyzed the activities. Using slightly different terminology, they could as easily be called 'intra/cultural grassroots community arts initiatives'.

To Stoffen, however, these processes and the two-yearly events they generate are much more than that: they are a continuous attempt to break through and question dominant power relations in Brussels and to bridge the multiple gaps that exist in her city. Stoffen explains:

“The European Union offices bring 200,000 foreigners to Brussels (including NGOs and lobby firms, which is not counting the many migrants of African origin with a Belgian nationality). Most of them stay no longer than two years, have high incomes and push the less affluent to the edge of the housing market. One third of the population is younger than 25. A third of these young people live under the poverty line, and another third is unemployed”.



Reyskens, Peter and Joke Vandenabeele, „De zin in een parade: omgaan met diversiteit in de ateliers van Zinneke Parade.”
Volkenkunde 2015, 3: 357-70

Stoffen also points to another abyss: the one between “the cultural mix in the underbelly of our city on the one hand and visible artistic productions on the other, between popular culture and documented canonic culture, which is largely western. Excellent art is not interested in what’s happening in our neighborhoods. But that is changing now thanks to Zinneke” (all these quotations are from an interview that Paul Feld held with Myriam Stoffen on 3 April 2015).

In terms of these social and artistic aspects, Zinneke can be regarded as a ‘neo parade’, a genre that can be traced back to anti-racist pageants in the United States and South Africa from the beginning of the 20th century (see Scott Giles, Freda. “Star of Ethiopia 1913,” in James V. Hatch, ed. *Black Theatre USA: African Americans, the Early Period 1847 – 1938*. New York: Free Press, 1996; and Kruger, Loren. *The Drama of South Africa: Plays, Pageants and Publics*. London: Routledge, 1999).

Neo-parades emphatically distinguish themselves from conservative, religiously inspired, ritualistic pageants and processions, which have their origins in the western Middle Ages. They also present themselves as an alternative to essentialist and proto-fascist displays of nationalism in contemporary protest marches like those of the anti-Islamic Pegida in Germany, the Orangemen in Northern Ireland, or Jerusalem Day in Israel, just to name a few. And while closer in spirit, its emphasis on artistic quality and

social inclusiveness also distinguishes the neo-parade from phenomena like carnival and emancipatory (and increasingly commercial) events like Gay Prides.

The neo-parade has much more affinity with the roaming site-specific spectacles of Bread & Puppet, Welfare State, Dogtroep, with Argentinian and Uruguyan *Murgas* and with the courageous colorful parade-like performances that reclaim public space back from narco gangs in Latin American urban working-class neighborhoods. Impressive examples of these are projects by Caja Lúdica in Guatemala City and Barrio Comparsa in Medellín, Colombia, about which I write more extensively in an essay included in Tim Prentki's book, *Applied Theatre: Development* (London: Bloomsbury-Methuen, 2015).



The photo above features a scene from a fantastic collectively created promenade site-specific show in the favela Jardim Romano in São Paulo by the group Estopô Baláio, which also fits into the neo parade category – and whose artistic director João Junior came to Utrecht in August 2016 to share his experience about moveable site-specific performances in public space.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_AJbriP6Jg

Zinneke Parade in 2016...

Preparations for the 9th Zinneke parade had started as they always do: during the previous one in May 2014 (it's a two-yearly event, remember?). At the end of the parade, voting ballots had been distributed among spectators and participants had been asked to choose the next theme. In the fall of 2014, the new theme had been announced – Fragile – and immediately groups had begun to brainstorm, apply for funds from the central organization, and scout for professional artists they would like to work with. These could be visual artists, musicians, choreographers or theatre makers. In March 2016, all 22 zinnodes, including the Fanfakids from Molenbeek - which I have mentioned earlier and which also have visited the Netherlands on several occasions thanks to our collaboration with Met-X. All of these community-based groups were in the middle of this pleasurable collective process in March 2016 when the terrorist attacks occurred at Brussels airport and at one of the city's subway stations. For several weeks, public life in Brussels came to a virtual standstill and collectively traumatized its citizens. Large-scale public events,

including international soccer matches, were cancelled. Until well into May 2016 it, therefore, remained unsure whether the Zinneke Parade would be allowed to take place at all, but eventually Myriam Stoffen and her team were given the green light.

When four friends and I – all of us involved in Utrecht’s Saint Martin’s Parade - covered the 200 kilometers by car from our homes in Utrecht to Brussels on Friday afternoon the 21st of May, we were filled with a mix of excitement and anxiety. We had arranged to meet our MET-X colleague and friend Vital Schraenen at 9 PM, before the traditional and somewhat anarchic torch-lit pre-parade procession of vehicles and performers to a central square in the Belgian capital. Before this Friday, several rehearsals – local mini-parades, in fact - had already been held during the previous days in the outlying districts. The following clip gives you a sense of the atmosphere of that evening. Particularly noteworthy are the relative absence of security forces, the ecstatic dance of Moroccan youngsters, and the fireworks, which in itself contained chilling echoes of the March attacks and provided a symbolic challenge to the perpetrators and their sympathizers.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_rcATf4c2wA&t=21s



On Saturday afternoon, the Zinneke Parade proper took place, without any incident. Again, very few police were visible. Security was provided by disarmingly surreal traffic conductors in paper coats and face paint (see the earlier picture of Myriam Stoffen, who – together with Vital – was one of them). Please pardon my sloppy camera work in the following clip, in which the aptly named Vital provides a bit of context from a local perspective. Afterwards, we see him conduct an improvised rhythmic and choreographic finale after the Saturday daytime parade, which could be considered a positive symbolic answer to the March attacks. It was a moving, peaceful, metaphoric explosion in front of the Stock Exchange of Brussels, collectively created by approximately 50,000 human beings who needed to express their loss, their fear, their togetherness in difference, and certainly also their defiance to terror.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akD_SeOHP6g&t=3s

In his most recent book, *Terror and Performance*, Rustom Bharucha does not explicitly address artistic parades like Zinneke. After an intriguing semantic dissection of the separate keywords ‘terror’ and ‘performance’, the cases he has chosen to analyze are consciously placed in non-western localities: The Philippines, India, Rwanda, and South Africa. His work nevertheless provides useful insights that can help determine the significance of what I witnessed in Brussels in May 2016. Thus, he usefully reminds us of the other side of the coin: the potential danger of ‘state terrorism’ (think of the prisons in Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib) and the paradox of authorities protecting the liberty of civilians by effectively curtailing their freedom with all kinds of security measures. Bharucha also points to the performative dimension in many recent terrorist attacks in which pre-recorded video testimonials play an important role as they are played back *ad nauseum* through the media. To counter this - as well as to counter the counter-terrorism of the state - he calls on artists to create ‘new imaginaries of non-violence’.



The rather wild, anarchic Friday night procession of vehicles, performers and torches that led to an extended impromptu musical improvisation and – under the circumstances – a rather surprising explosive fireworks display with real bangs and crackers, Bharucha might have read as an ‘act of dissidence’: [quote] “a queer refusal to submit to norms that define and constrain” (unquote, 21). It inspired us to create our own pre-parade loose event on Friday night here in Utrecht. Less anarchic perhaps than its Brussels counterpart, it nevertheless managed to capture some of its spirit...



The Saturday afternoon parade in Brussels in May 2016 was a much more structured performance. It had a clear beginning and an end, entrances and exits, and it contained elements of acting, dancing, playing, design, and it had dramaturgical logic.

It was also spatially limited by the spectators on the sidewalks and a more or less predetermined route that ended at the Brussels Stock Exchange. But rather than by heavily armed cops and soldiers (who had dominated the streets through the month of April until literally days before the parade), this roaming spectacle – quite incredibly - was regulated by no more than 25 Zinneke volunteers, dressed and made up to look like anything but security agents. Their surreal, gentle appearance and the sights and sounds of the 22 zinnodes in the parade - intentionally or not – effectively countered images of terrorism and counter-terrorism that had been inundating the city since the 22nd of March. These peaceful counter images had been designed and produced well beyond media and state control, on people’s own terms and turf, slowly and reciprocally, in a process of many months.

On the surface, the 2016 Zinneke Parade was a two-hour roaming performance that was joyful, colorful and playful, but underneath it all there was a great deal of tension. It was the first large-scale event after the March attacks that involved tens of thousands of people in public space. It had an **implicit** defiant and commemorative quality that became **explicit** during the finale in front of the Stock Exchange building. In the weeks prior to May 21st, its walls had been covered with solidarity messages and its steps with flowers.

Participating in the parade – as well as spectating on the sidewalk – required courage and a need to activate what Bharucha calls (with reference to Gandhi) a [quote] ‘sacrificial instinct’ (155-6). The stress, the fear and the indomitable urge to celebrate life were all released in the final crescendo: a blasting collective expiration that ended with a symbolic explosion from confetti canons and Vital Schraenen hanging spent over the railing of the scaffolding from which he had been conducting the crowd.

Anyone is welcome to do with this story what they like. We in Utrecht remain deeply inspired by what Myriam, Luc, Vital and 1000s of volunteers have accomplished in Brussels during eighteen years’ time. Even without the terrorist attacks it was already an aesthetically strong, highly inclusive performative celebration of the enormous intra/cultural diversity and vitality of this city. In its 2016 edition, however, the Zinneke Parade also demonstrated its potential for collective healing, for creatively practicing non-violence, for generating the social power to literally and figuratively bounce back after a disaster, and the collective expression of resistance to fear, emphatically stating that the streets belong to us, no matter how many bombs you may throw at us. It is an inspiring example of aesthetically packaged collective human courage in which artists reciprocally collaborate with urban residents in all their intra/cultural diversity. In Utrecht we are determined to embrace it in our own parade art, for which we seek inspiration wherever we can find it: Medellín, Colombia; Durban, South Africa; São Paulo, Brazil; in Guatemala City and in Brussels, Belgium. Because we firmly believe that in this day and age no city can afford to be without this kind of citizen-driven gentle creative performative force in which local residents respectfully collaborate with one another across multiple differences – not to erase them but to understand them better - and thus collectively express their freedom to be who they are in their own streets.