

Does Public Art Have to Be Bad Art?

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New Public Monuments: Urban Art and Everyday Aesthetic Experience

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Abstract: The role and function of public art is currently undergoing some large-scale changes. Many new artworks which are situated within the already existing urban sphere, seem to be changing the definition of public art, each in their own way. Simultaneously, there exists a trend that endorses more traditional forms of public art. Juxtaposing and comparing the aesthetic implications of different types of artworks, it is possible to see how they contribute to the contemporary understanding of the urban sphere. In this paper, I take a look at the explicit and implicit aesthetic values that these simultaneously existing contemporary forms of public art are based on. The cases selected for closer look are examples of prominent and recent works of public art from downtown Helsinki: *He who Brings the Light* (unveiled in 2017) by Pekka Kauhanen and *Running Man* (performed in 2016–17) by Nestori Syrjälä. What space and what kind of position is subscribed to the perceiver by these very different types of yet equally established artworks? What kind of experiences and possibilities of participation do these works entail? The focus is on the undergoing redefinition of public art that revolves around these questions.

Keywords: Public art, Urban aesthetics, Aesthetic experience, Public monuments, Contemporary art, Sculpture art, Performance art

1 Introduction

The role and character of public art is currently undergoing some far reaching changes. This change has been recognized more overtly since the 1990s followed by more emphasis on collaborative art projects and process-based public art. These developments are linked also to a new interest in increasing the quality of life for those living in cities. Artworks that are placed or situated within an already existing urban sphere (in contrast to works that are integrated into new areas during their building phases), are challenging and changing the definition of public art, each in their own way and pace. Yet simultaneously, there is also a trend that endorses more traditional forms of public art.

By juxtaposing, comparing, interpreting, and focusing on the experiential quality of selected recent artworks, it is possible to see how they contribute to our understanding of urban everyday aesthetic experiences. In this article, I take a look at the explicit and implicit aesthetic values that are relied on by simultaneously existing contemporary practices of public monumental art. The cases presented here comprise recently executed works from the central Helsinki area: I argue thus, that *Running Man* (2016–17) by Nestori Syrjälä and *He who Brings the Light* (*Valontuoja*, 2017) by Pekka Kauhanen are works that are representative of the changes and new developments that are taking place within the sphere of public urban monumental art in Helsinki at this time.

When focusing on the everyday aspects of urban aesthetic experiences, it is important to assess, what type of relation to space and what kind of experiential positions are created for the audiences by these very

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different types of artworks. Neither of these artworks is considered to be participatory as such, yet some type of aesthetic attitude towards them is of necessity written into the ways in which they work within the urban space. The redefinition of public art that is currently taking place revolves around these questions, together with that of democratization of art within the public sphere. In this article I focus from the perspective of everyday aesthetics on examining the aesthetic consequences and implications of these different artistic works that take place in the shared urban environment.

One of my leading ideas here has also been to provide a snapshot of our time as it makes use of and defines urban art, public monuments in particular. The theme of this article has been developed through discussions on various occasions with students at the School of Arts, Design and Architecture of Aalto University in 2015–18 and I am grateful and as enthusiastic as ever about these moments of sharing thoughts.

1.1 Case 1: *Running Man*

*Running Man*¹ by Nestori Syrjälä (b. 1983) is an urban performance piece, which took place in 2016–17. The work was commissioned by the Finnish State Art Commission and the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma with a budget of 60,000 euros for the work. It was the joint winner of a public art competition held in 2016.² This competition was named in its later phase *Seeking Company for the Marshal* (“Marskille kaveri” in Finnish), referring to the statue of Marshal Mannerheim outside Kiasma (by Aimo Tukiainen, unveiled in 1960). This equestrian statue of the historic Finnish military leader and statesman, is one of the most emblematic and best-known Finnish public art monuments yet it has also been controversial for both political and aesthetic reasons. This humorous reference in the name of the competition challenged artists directly to bring forth their vision of a contemporary form of public monument.

Running Man consists of a man in a suit running frantically through Helsinki city centre, beginning and ending his run at the Kiasma’s museum building. Syrjälä’s runner is not necessarily recognized as art at all: he is indiscernible from other more or less strange urban figures that one comes across every day in the city. *Running Man* builds its effect upon dramatisation and on the bodily and gestural hints of anxious and stressed-out behaviour of the runner, which then might or might not become evident for the average passer-by. The runner also looks lost, as in the demo video of the work that has been made by the artist.³ The runner also has some changing props with him, and has a visibly bad rash, a sign according to the artist, of stress. Based on the video recording, sometimes the runner also runs along tram rails and roads. The work elicits visible reactions from passers-by, but people do not necessarily show any sign of being perplexed by the running figure. One must bear in mind that part of urban living is associated with the acquired quality of not becoming visibly shaken by what is taking place on the streets. Yet, this “urban numbness” does not mean directly that surrounding phenomena are not perceived or that they would not affect oneself in either positive or negative ways: the reactions are internalised and concealed.

In the context of monumental art, the temporal perspective of Syrjälä’s work is particularly interesting. The performance took place once a week for an hour at a time over a period of a year (2016–17). In a way, the work has a looser relation to that which can still be described as the current mainstream definition of art: it is a conceptual piece that is physically defined by the temporal frame of being performed according to a pre-existing plan. More crucially for the central topic of urban aesthetics in this paper, it does not take up any urban space permanently but works entirely within the existing urban grid of permanent and temporary structures.

1 Finnish National Gallery, “Running Man”.

2 The competition finalists were presented in an exhibition with the same name in 29.1.–27.3.2016, see Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, “Seeking Company for the Marshal”.

3 Syrjälä, “Running Man Demo”.

1.2 Case 2: *He Who Brings the Light*

*He Who Brings the Light*⁴ (“Valontuoja”, 2017) by Pekka Kauhanen (b. 1954) was unveiled on 30 November 2017, marking the passing of 78 years from the beginning of the Finnish Winter War in 1939. The material he used is acid-proof steel that is made to last for at least 500 years. The sculpture is 10 metres high in total: the base is 3 metres and the figure topping it stands 7 metres tall. Despite its punctured structure, the work weighs an imposing 6,000kg, the figure being 1,000kg and the spherical base 5,000kg.⁵ The sheer physical size of the work would make it a substantial addition to any location. In fact it is a site-specific war memorial, located in Kasarmitori Square in central Helsinki, and it stands in front of the Ministry of Defence of Finland main building. The location has been chosen according to the theme of the commission and it accentuates the existence and role of the Ministry. Besides polished and shiny steel, light and photography are equally important materials for the statue. The name and structure emphasise this, making light an integral part of the work instead of being there merely for better visibility.

The base has over 300 holes in it: one can peek inside these and LED lights are inside both the figure and the base. There are 105 photographs inside the base and these represent the 105 days of the Winter War. Photographs are added so that they can also be changed, if future generations decide to do so. The round glass windows in the base give the work a somewhat futuristic look. Information about the Winter War can be accessed through an attached QR code. It has also been stated that one of the explicit ambitions for the work is for it to become an internationally acknowledged tourist attraction, spreading information about Finnish war history. The budget for the work was approximately 1.4 million euros, paid in equal shares by the state, the City of Helsinki and the Winter War Association (collected by private donations).

As a statue, *He who Brings the Light* is an interpretation of the traditional monumental public art style. Its vertical spatial character is defined by its subject matter and its outer form follows the outlines of the soldier depicted in the upper part of the statue. The fine art tradition of representing historical figures in urban statues is here replaced by a figure that, without prior knowledge, one might not recognise as a soldier.

Again, the time span of the work is especially interesting: the anticipated long lifespan of the work is emphasised in many decisions made during its execution: it is built for future generations of urban dwellers at least as much as for current ones. The enduring qualities of the work are thus expected to resonate with the preferences of future generations too. This type of authoritative intergenerational perspective is typical of traditional forms of public artworks, which are planned to stay in place for the foreseeable future. It is indeed very rare for public monuments to be removed or relocated.⁶ These options have sometimes been presented when opposing strongly the ideological or political content or implication of artworks within the urban sphere. Even then, general opinion tends to gravitate against change and new interpretations about the historical value of these works.

1.3 Comparing the two cases

There are similarities between these two artworks and these features point towards conventional art forms: both are works executed by one artist, for example, even though both works have required other people in the realisation process. Both are also public commissions and competition winners: Kauhanen won an art competition with his proposal in 2013, Syrjälä in 2016. However, the differences are interesting in the sense that both artworks have very different approaches towards the historically loaded and controversial form of urban monumental art. One purpose of public art has traditionally been associated with the display of

⁴ The artwork is part of the collection of public art maintained by the Helsinki Art Museum HAM, see Helsinki Art Museum HAM, “National Memorial to the Winter War”.

⁵ Yle, “Finland unveils national memorial to commemorate Winter War”.

⁶ Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (1981) is a well-known example where an artwork was ultimately removed because of its experiential qualities, considered not to match its location in New York City’s Federal Plaza (see Senie, “The Tilted Arc Controversy”).

power: “Perhaps not the least mission of urban monumental art was the reduction of the common man.”⁷ Kauhanen’s war memorial achieves this by its sheer size, which is intentionally linked to its direct purpose of creating respect and reverence towards its subject matter. Syrjälä’s work does not imply power by its physical features but more through its relation to the defining power of the art world.

The temporal perspective of Kauhanen’s statue is the most conventional one of the two for this type of monumental artwork. It is erected first and foremost as a monument for a historical event and in doing this, it relies also on the memory and interpretation of subsequent generations of urban dwellers. Public monuments such as this are designed to give collective memory substance and a material form and, at the same time, to carve out a physical space for commemoration.

What about the commemorative elements of *Running Man* then? It was chosen and commissioned to be a continuation and a partner to a famous public monument, but what does it in itself encourage us to remember?

A man in a suit searches desperately for something in a world devastated by ecological crises. [break] Dressed in a dark suit, a man runs in downtown Helsinki, becoming increasingly lost and out of breath. *Running Man* is a dramatised image of contemporary humanity: a hurried and lost figure in a world beset by ecological, economic and political crises. The work consists of several runs, each lasting for one hour, conducted once a week for one year. The runners are actors and dancers. The choreography of the runs is derived from the physical manifestations of psychological crisis reactions.⁸

This describes the artist’s intention in a clear way. The work is intended to be a commentary on the current state of the world, stress being caused by the awareness of the many complex and interlaced crises on ecological and political levels that humankind is currently facing. The work thus gives individual expression to shared fears and describes the overall atmosphere of fear and being lost. This accelerating sense of chaos does not, however, exclude humour as an important element of the work. Because of its execution, the interpretation of the work depends to a great extent on the gut reaction of the urban dweller, and laughter is a well-known stress response. *The absurd* is thus one semi-aesthetic category that this particular work is playing on.

It is notable that despite being action-oriented, *Running Man* is not a social intervention or participatory art as such, even though its form as public art is unconventional. Monumental art within the urban sphere has usually had a static and stable presence in the city as it seeks to *celebrate* through its physical manifestation.⁹ In fact, contrary to this, *Running Man* by its very ephemeral form seems to refer to the experienced uncertainty of our own era. The artist refers to “running as a public monument” in the project proposal.¹⁰ Running as a physical practice is at the same time something primeval and it has also become a symbol for ideologies about economical and technological development of the Western societies. There are also interesting contemporary artistic practices that take running as their starting point.¹¹

What is the imagined audience these types of contemporary urban artworks are aiming at? Instead of collective experiences I am more interested here in understanding the individual, private, and even intimate experiences that public artworks within the urban sphere produce. How does this experience unfold in the midst of the mundane temporal ramifications and necessities of everyday life. Together with the established notions about public art, new forms of public monumental art redefine the way the urban environment is used. Besides the generational shift taking place in the attitudes about ways of using shared urban space, this is also a debate about aesthetic value and how or in what form it is – or should be – manifested in urban space.

The way that these artworks are placed in the public sphere and their potential audiences make them very different in nature. People derive pleasure from specifically urban phenomena in many ways, through different forms of urban mobility, for example. Life between buildings changes when it is taken up as an arena

7 Mumford, “The City in History”, 70.

8 Syrjälä, “Running Man”.

9 Krause, “Public Art”, 23.

10 Syrjälä, “Running Man Helsinki”.

11 E.g. Kai Syng Tan & Matti Tainio’s work, see Tainio, “Parallel Worlds”.

for artistic activity. It is also interesting to think about how these works co-exist with their environments. Sharing space with different types of artistic pursuits is an overtly urban experience. As artefacts, objects, and spatio-temporally functioning performative works, they have their unique affordances that are realised in the everyday practices revolving around them.

2 Urban everyday aesthetics in urban monumental art

Aesthetics as an academic discipline has most often been understood to be synonymous with the philosophy of art. Although art is and always will be a central topic for aesthetic inquiry, today there is more interest in other topics in aesthetic debate. Urban aesthetics is one such topic, originating from environmental aesthetics and also having roots in architectural theory. The notion of everyday aesthetics refers to the aesthetic experiences that are embedded in the everyday.¹² Urban aesthetics complements this notion and the two research strands can be combined in order to assess everyday urban environments through their aesthetic qualities, how those qualities are expressed and how they ultimately become experienced.¹³

Aesthetics in general can be defined as the theory of sensible experience, as proposed by Arnold Berleant.¹⁴ Urban aesthetics, in turn, traces these sensible experiences within urban environments. While urban aesthetics derives from environmental aesthetics, it also takes into consideration other theoretical positions that have the urban sphere under their lens: urban studies, human geography, planning theory and architecture criticism, to name a few. Everyday urban life is expressed through repetition, habits and expected elements interwoven with unexpected ones. Lived and experienced time, as in Bergsonian *temps vécu*, and the Bollnowian corresponding formulations of lived space, acquire their new, specific expressions within the everyday urban sphere of experience.¹⁵

What kind of experiences do the works of art under discussion stimulate when examined from the perspective of everyday life? The intention is to probe the position and experience of an urban dweller, in other words the involuntary audience. Surprisingly, urban public artworks have been seldom studied in the fields of everyday or urban aesthetics. One approach would be to focus on how these works become a part of the familiar grid of everyday surroundings. For example, their presence is likely to affect people's walking routes to an extent. Public art monuments can also attract the attention of the passers-by for varying amounts of time, drawing them away from something else. *Sensory overload* is sometimes presented as a concern regarding urban environments. However, this is mostly linked to advertisements or other signs of commercial culture that intentionally strive to grab the attention of urban dwellers.

Can these new urban monumental artworks provide a way of negotiating the uses of shared urban space? One possibility is to look at the concept of *aesthetic attitude* and how that can be understood in the context of experiencing art in urban space.¹⁶ Experiencing urban art relies on and directly affects, and even plays with those urban sensibilities that develop in relation to a particular city in question. Art is thus heavily affected by its location, as could be seen from examples of artworks that have been presented in different cities.

Some forms of public art imply more clearly an aesthetic position for their reception. An analysis of reception within the sphere of public art is a challenging task, since the works used here as examples also represent very varying traditions, media and types. Appreciation of them seems to be partly based on them having different audiences. However, they are located in the same city, just a few blocks from one another. Thus examining the implicit “push and pull” of the works, what makes them attractive for some audiences, is interesting from an aesthetic point of view. For example, within the sphere of art, the sensory parts of the experience are often difficult, if not even impossible to distinguish from the interpretative elements of the experience. This problem is related to a wider field within philosophical aesthetics that focuses

¹² Saito, “Everyday Aesthetics”.

¹³ Haapala, “The Everyday, Building, and Architecture”.

¹⁴ Berleant, “Environmental Sensibility”, 17.

¹⁵ See e.g. Bergson, “Time and Free Will”, Bollnow, “Human Space”.

¹⁶ Lehtinen, “Excursions into Everyday Spaces”, 152–156.

on distinguishing between the sensory and cognitive parts of experience. In the case of urban art, when artworks are not always even recognisable as art (as in the case of Syrjälä's work), this becomes an even more important question.

The general classifications used to name these artworks also vary: "urban environmental art" and "urban art" take the *locations* for exhibiting these works into focus. "Public art" makes a stronger reference to their *audience* and also the free and shared *access* to the works.¹⁷ None of these terms takes into account the individual variations in experiencing them. In the case of public art, there have traditionally been strong ulterior motives besides their aesthetic purposes: "In the case of public artworks, the fact that the work is intended to gather together the public to reflect on an issue of common concern by means of an aesthetic interaction is a constitutive part of the experience."¹⁸ This "social content" of artworks varies necessarily as does the amount of content. What I am interested here is, what kind of experiential position some different types of public artworks together with their location point to their audiences.

The emphasis here is on the aesthetic understanding of urban monumental art but it also has political implications. One could distinguish the political from the aesthetic by stating that political implications address the reasons *why* certain things are happening in the public sphere but the aesthetic level helps in understanding *how* these things are taking place and in what form they are made manifest. Different types of decisions, and the values on which those decisions are based, find expression through public art.

3 Commemoration or integration: differing strategies of aesthetic engagement

All art placed within the urban sphere has some type of implicit or explicit experiential position to point for their audiences. At the very least, they make some experiences more likely than others. The focus here is on officially commissioned works, that in recent years have co-existed with more and more grassroots-originated urban art. Street art and activist art are both predominately art practices that take place in shared urban space. Parallel to the proliferation of these types of flexible practices, art is seen also more and more as an elementary part of urban design, as opposed to the "cherry-on-top" approach, where public artworks are added to newly built urban environments as the final touch.

It has to be noted here that the memorial, monumental strand in art can be traced to a wider range of art forms than is usually understood to be the case.¹⁹ Artworks often carry the purpose of commemoration, yet urban monumental art might not be distinguishable for this reason alone. How do we engage with public monuments as objects of commemoration when we focus on their everyday properties? The everyday aesthetic effect of monumental artworks often differs from their official message and content. We become familiar with these works if we pass them each day, and they become a part of our individual everyday field that affects our aesthetic sensibilities.²⁰

Monuments are often discernible by their sheer size. Placed outdoors, they are subject to changing weather conditions and the impact of natural elements such as seagulls, pigeons, moss, and dirt. Urban monuments also make cities distinguishable from one another even though especially older monuments might not receive attention but instead become part of the urban backdrop. The tourist's gaze is by necessity somewhat different from those of a city's inhabitants.²¹ For the tourist, everything is tinted by being interesting and new to the senses.

Some type of intergenerational approach is already implied by the very concept of monumental art. What type of definition it accrues, is decided and interpreted individually in each case of urban commemorative art. Traditional monuments are often built to honour the memory of a past hero, event, or idea. This makes

¹⁷ For recent definitions of public art, see e.g. Puolakka, "Public Art".

¹⁸ Puolakka, "Public Art", 372

¹⁹ Carroll, "Art and Recollection", 3.

²⁰ See e.g. Berleant, "Environmental Sensibility".

²¹ See e.g. Urry & Larsen "The Tourist Gaze 3.0".

it more or less imperative for viewers to take a reminiscent stance. Monuments act as reminders for current and future generations. However, the aesthetic experiences these works provoke might not be dictated only by this mission of theirs. This directing back of thoughts is the logic for their very existence, even though the experiences they elicit might eventually travel in many other directions. Sometimes the location, surroundings or temporary factors will ultimately affect how a commemorative work is experienced.

The concept of aesthetic engagement, developed most notably by Arnold Berleant, takes into consideration the multi-sensoral and reciprocal components of experiencing art. This approach proves to be especially useful when faced with artworks on a daily basis rather than in dedicated gallery or museum spaces. Some amount of reciprocity is often considered to be a prerequisite for an aesthetic experience. How this idea of reciprocal relation is present in the case of public urban monumental art is not always as easy to understand as one would presuppose. The everyday interaction with public artworks is potentially a more democratic form of acquiring art experiences, in the sense that it takes place in unrestricted, free outdoor spaces. Also the viewer allocates their free time to experience the work; traditional monumental sculpture is available all day, seven days a week. The traditional materials used are enduring – stone, bronze, or steel sculptures require very little maintenance work. These types of monuments are usually situated in city centres or more affluent neighbourhoods near the centre, which inevitably affects how an audience is formed, and who experiences the work in question each day. This is also the case with Kauhanen's work. This way of understanding art relies on its "power that tears experience of ordinariness".²² The physical and material features of artworks become prominent in the urban environment: dirt, noise, vegetation and all other unplanned factors are present. The features of the artwork and its environment become meshed in various ways: when a seagull is sitting on the top of the statue or when the rain changes the colour of its material. The detachment of art from life becomes routinely questioned in those random daily interactions that take place in urban environments. Public monuments become a part of an urban ecosystem, where everything happens in relation to something seemingly incongruent.

Urban art requires some degree of aesthetic sensibility in order for it to be acknowledged for its aesthetic value in the first place. Within the urban sphere, the senses are met by an affluent array of sensory stimuli. How aesthetic sensibility is cultivated within the urban sphere and whether there should be a conscious effort to do that, brings us close to questions about aesthetic education. According to Berleant, this sensibility is capable of being influenced or even severely manipulated by social practices and forces.²³

Some artworks accentuate their relation to urban space as a space for everyday use (besides *Running Man*, also e.g. *Urban Space Occupation Kit* by Otto Karvonen, 2006–²⁴); others efface this relation and take their place in cities with a more unquestioned tone. This is done either via humour (e.g. *Art Policeman* by Kauhanen, 2006) or relying on authority as in the case of *He Who Brings the Light*, which is designed to commemorate the Finnish Winter War, which still is a somewhat sensitive topic in public discussions.

4 Conclusions

It is clear that since the 1990s there has been an increasing variety of work within the sphere of public art. Not all urban art falls neatly into the categories of public or environmental art, but all urban art must, and necessarily will, take some stance towards its possible audience: the users of urban space. The expansion of the scope of public art becomes visible in its experienced forms, of which two examples have been presented here. The framework of urban aesthetics offers an opportunity to assess their effect on everyday urban experience, even though their artistic scope is also always present to some degree in the everyday interactions with and around them.

What happens within shared physical public space is a complex matter. This article has set out to explore urban monumental art from the perspective of urban aesthetics. This relatively new field of philosophical

²² Rancière, "Aesthetics and Its Discontents", 19.

²³ Berleant, "Environmental Sensibility".

²⁴ Karvonen, "Urban Space Occupation Kit".

inquiry is especially concerned with understanding how urban environments are used and experienced on an everyday basis. How the decisions are made about public art projects and their inclusion into an already existing urban sphere, and what those decisions are based on, are beyond the scope of this article. Instead, the focus is on presenting some ways of making sense of the experiential effects – intentional and unintentional – of some types of recently presented work.

The works presented and scrutinised here embody some of the existing ideals and ideologies of the currently shared understanding of the role and function of art. They manifest this in different ways that might not be explicitly clear for those within their direct reach. Public art in general is such a wide area for research or public discussion that some boundaries for reasons of practicality are needed. Yet this is also proving to be problematic. There certainly exists a genre or type of “official public art” that within Finnish urban culture does not seem to be negotiated to the extent that it should be. This inevitably normalizes some forms of expressions while suppressing others.

In a sense, public monuments placed in urban environments become an everyday experiential commodity. Their presence implies a large audience of more or less focused spectators, bringing them at least potentially high use value. Yet the sublimity of artistic pursuits and products becomes subdued when artworks are continuously present in the everyday life of urban dwellers.²⁵ Syrjälä's *Running Man* represents a new type of paradigm in the genre of urban monumental art. It can be argued that the radical nature of *Running Man* is not so much about its unconventional medium, but instead the result of its temporal presence: it takes place only for a specific time. The relation of time to monuments has traditionally been a straightforward one: monuments are built to last, at the very least for an undetermined period of time. Is a temporary monument still a monument, one might ask? The other pressing question about the spectator's position is also directly linked with this temporal side of the work.

It is important to emphasise that these works are to be treated not only as public art but also as monuments. By entering the competition, the purpose of *Running Man* is even more overtly intended to extend and redefine the notion of public monumental art. Within the contemporary art scene this type of experimentation with newer forms is more easily accepted, whereas more conventional commissions such as *He Who Brings the Light*, which is a war memorial, tend to lean towards more traditional forms of monumental art. Both the artworks discussed here represent a top-down strategy for increasing aesthetic and artistic values present in our environments: they have been commissioned by institutions which specialize both in cultivating historical understanding and memory. However, the works show a very different approach towards the urban sphere understood as an everyday environment.

There is definitely an interesting development taking place within the urban sphere, both from the perspective of those interested in either artistic and/or experiential phenomena. Public monumental art adds to the experiential potential of urban environments and is a strong tool for manipulating urban everyday experiences through its manifestations of values. This is also why it should not only be addressed in the discourses and contexts of art but also as an integral part of how urban everyday life takes form: this requires on-going work on understanding the shared and diverging parameters of urban experiences.

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²⁵ Rancière, “Aesthetics and Its Discontents”, 19.

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