Théâtre Source

URBAN ART AS A CONNECTING TECHNOLOGY: A CASE STUDY

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Introduction

“Urban art does not only make the city prettier, it can also improve people’s lives” (Van den Bril 2015). This statement by Marilyn Douala Manga Bell can be said to be the unofficial motto of doual’art. In 1991, Douala Manga Bell and her husband, founded doual’art, a centre for contemporary art. Doual’art still exists today. Located in Douala, the economic and industrial heart of Cameroon, doual’art’s objective is to use art and urban projects to influence life in Douala (doual’art n.d.).

In 2010, Aguirre travelled to Douala to take part in doual’art’s festival of urban art, SUD 2010 (Salon Urbain de Douala). As the theme of the third edition of the festival was water, Aguirre decided to reconstruct an existing well in the slums of Douala, in a neighbourhood called Ndogassi III. It was a long-winded work, but three years later, on 8 December 2013, Théâtre Source was officially opened. At the opening, one of the local residents concluded: “It’s in the first place a work of art, because it’s beautiful. It offers a lot of possibilities in every possible field. Culturally, it is a place for people to gather. Sports people like to come here. Everyone finds it to their liking. Everyone. But it’s still art” (Van den Bril 2015).

In my research, I reflect upon the question of how urban art functions as a connecting technology. More specifically, I study the connections and disconnections created by Philip Aguirre’s Théâtre Source. Since most of the existing literature focusses on the relation between urban art and development (for example Pinther, Nzewi and Fischer 2015; Babina and Douala Bell 2007; Pensa 2017: Koyo, Schoups and Swinnen 2015), with this case study, I propose a new and complementary perspective.

I present the conclusions of my research in two formats: a short story and this accompanying essay, which serves to provide some background to the story. It is important to note that the short story is to be read first. The essay consists of four parts and is structured as follows. The first section presents the theoretical literature on connectivity and introduces Alain de Botton and John Armstrong’s theory about the diverse functions of art. This section is followed by a discussion of the sources. Thirdly, I elaborate on my decision to write a short story. Lastly, in the fourth section, I present the connections and disconnections created by Théâtre Source.
Connectivity & Art

Theoretical literature on connectivity takes as its point of departure the premise that in this day and age people live in a post-global world. Reflecting on what this means for African societies, Mirjam de Bruijn and Rijn van Dijk argue that the “multitude of connections is a fact and has become part of the experience of most Africans. Connections are no longer a scare resource” (de Bruijn and van Dijk 2012, 6).

According to them and other scholars who study connectivity, it is necessary to go beyond the traditional network studies that only attempt to “understand the “people involved in these networks” (de Bruijn and van Dijk 2012, 4). Instead, they stress the significance of the process of linking in itself. There are at least two reasons to do so. First, de Bruijn and van Dijk argue that “connections are never a neutral phenomenon but in their appropriation by people, groups, and institutions form part of power hierarchies in ways that are informed historically” (de Bruijn and van Dijk 2012, 6). Connections are thus not neutral, nor do they remain the same. This relates to the second point. A new connection “sets things in motion, enables transformations, and builds new power relations” (de Bruijn and van Dijk 2012, 8). The same occurs when a connection ceases to exist. In short, connections are shaped by and appropriated by society. As society changes, the connections change too. Similarly, the creation of new connections or the cutting off of old ones has an effect on society.

As mentioned in the introduction, in this research I reflect upon the question of how urban art, and more specifically Théâtre Source, functions as a connecting technology. Defining Théâtre Source as a connecting technology means that – even though the well is an object – I consider it to be an actor with its own agency (de Bruijn and van Dijk 2012). It is an acknowledgement of the fact that the well itself creates connections and disconnections. It is those connections and disconnections that I aim to uncover with this case study. Other objects that can be seen as actors with agency are, for example, computers or mobile phones.
John Urry’s article (2004) offers some important insights regarding connecting technologies. Urry argues in favour of a reconsideration of the way in which is generally thought about connections “at a distance.” He states that new technologies have changed the way people connect with each other. Connections at a distance are abundant, but most of these connections go hand in hand with what he calls “intermittent copresence” (Urry 2004, 32). Urry thus implies that feeling connected to other people is not enough. There is still a need for copresence. I mention Urry’s argument here, because the case study of Théâtre Source discussed in the fourth section of this essay, shows that arguably the most important connection created by the work of art is a very local one. Aguirre’s work of art transformed the nature of the well as a meeting point for the people from Ndopassi III and its surroundings.

Implicit in my research question is the assumption that creating connections and/or disconnections is one of the functions of art. In their book titled Art as Therapy (2013), Alain de Botton and John Armstrong also consider the functions of art. De Botton and Armstrong put forward the argument that we should use art as a tool. They explain: “The impact of art is often not what it should be, because the framing is wrong,” and call upon us to approach art in a different way than we do now (de Botton 2013). We should address the question of what art is for and dare to use it as a tool. De Botton and Armstrong continue their plea by listing seven things art can offer us. They call it the seven functions of art (de Botton and Armstrong 2013, 7):

1. Remembering
2. Hope
3. Sorrow
4. Rebalancing
5. Self-Understanding
6. Growth
7. Appreciation

De Botton and Armstrong do not explicitly talk about art in relation to connectivity. However, the seven functions of art they identify are not unrelated to the concept. After elaborating on the connections and disconnections created by Théâtre Source in the fourth section, I will clarify how de Botton and Armstrong’s functions of art relate to the concept of connectivity.
Sources

As I could not go to Douala to conduct field research, I had to rely on other sources. I am greatly indebted to Koen Van den Bril, who made a documentary about *Théâtre Source*, and Philip Aguirre, the artist. Both took the time to talk to me and answer all my questions. On the one hand, they provided me with important background information and some concrete facts about the project. On the other hand, we also spoke about their views on art. After introducing them to the concept of connectivity, I presented them with my research question. Their answers suggested interesting interpretations of *Théâtre Source* and inspired me for my further research.

In this section, I comment upon the different sources I used. First, I elaborate on Koen Van den Bril’s documentary *Théâtre Source*. Afterwards, I shortly summarise the interviews I had with Koen Van den Bril and Philip Aguirre and highlight the most important points they made.

Overview of the sources:

- Documentary *Théâtre Source*
- Interview with Koen Van den Bril
- Interview with Philip Aguirre

Secondary literature on Cameroon (read, but not all cited in this essay):

- Cross 2006
- DeLancey, Neh Mbu and DeLancey 2010
- Mberu and Pongou 2016
- Van Dijk, Foeken and van Til 2001
Documentary Théâtre Source

Koen Van den Bril’s documentary Théâtre Source was the starting point of this research (Van den Bril 2015). Re-watching it confirmed my assumption that Théâtre Source, and by extension urban art in Douala, would be an interesting topic to study in relation to the concept of connectivity.

In his documentary, Van den Bril brings into vision the process of the creation of Aguirre’s art project Théâtre Source. He recounts the process from the moment Aguirre travelled to Douala for the first time in 2010 to the official opening of Théâtre Source three years later. As Koen Van den Bril conducted many interviews, the documentary manages to present multiple perspectives. The documentary filmmaker talked with the founders of doual’art, with Philip Aguirre, with Cameroonian artists and with people from Ndopassi III. As a result, the documentary touches upon diverse themes. It is first and foremost a documentary about Théâtre Source, but it can also be seen as a story about Cameroon and the role of art as a means of development in this context.

Yet, it is justified to cast doubt on the independence of the documentary. Even though it includes many perspectives, it is striking that all interviewees are very positive about Aguirre’s art project. By this I do not suggest their appreciation is not genuine. I suspect that the overtly positive interpretation has something to do with one of Van den Bril’s underlying motivations, that is to pay respects to Aguirre’s work. When I spoke with Koen Van den Bril via Skype on 16 March 2018, he made no secret of the fact that he was a big fan of Aguirre’s work (Van den Bril 2018). Of course, Van den Bril is entitled to his opinion. Moreover, as the documentary filmmaker he is allowed to put forward a certain interpretation of Théâtre Source. The issue of independence is therefore only relevant in relation to the question of how to use this documentary as a primary source. It certainly is a mine of information. Nevertheless, the presented opinions about Théâtre Source may not simply be generalised.
Interview with Koen Van den Bril

In the interview I had with Van den Bril, we talked about more than just the reception of Théâtre Source. In the first part of the interview, he explained to me how he came up with the idea to make a documentary about Théâtre Source. “The immediate cause is a very personal story.” He continued: “My sister has dementia. Together, we went to Philip’s exposition in Oostende. My sister – she is a big fan of Aguirre’s work and an architect herself – was fascinated by the model of Théâtre Source.” Van den Bril was intrigued too so he spontaneously called Aguirre to ask him whether he could come to Cameroon to follow up on the project and make a documentary about it. Aguirre agreed. After telling me all of this, Van den Bril concluded that he made this documentary for his sister, but that his interest in and admiration for the project was as important in this decision (Van den Bril 2018).

Indirectly, Van den Bril also gave me an impression of what the weather conditions in Cameroon were like. When I asked him how the filming worked out, he mentioned that the documentary was a low budget production and that he chose to film with a photo camera. The quality of the images was great, but his material suffered from the heat and humidity (Van den Bril 2018).

For this reason, the interviews I had with Van den Bril and Aguirre were clarifying. Being asked about how people reacted to the project, both concluded that opinions differed. For instance, I asked Van den Bril whether he also spoke with people who felt indifferent about the project, or who criticized it. He stressed that most people reacted positively, but that there were indeed people who were opposed to it or simply did not care. Van den Bril argued that the closer people lived to the well, the more involved and therefore the more positive they were. He further explained that he assumes that the fact that Aguirre is a white artist might have had something to do with that (Van den Bril 2018). From the interview I had with Aguirre, the same conclusion arose: most people were positive, but not everyone. Aguirre told me, for example, that some of the men in Ndogpassi III were jealous of the men, their fellow residents of Ndogpassi III, who were hired to help with the construction (Aguirre y Otegui 2018). In conclusion, through these interviews I did manage to get a better understanding of how Théâtre Source was received.
PHILIP AGUIRRE Y OTEGUI

"A good work of art tells you something about the world."
Interview with Philip Aguirre y Otegui

On 24 March 2018, I interviewed Philip Aguirre. We met up at his house and sat in his studio to talk quietly. We had a conversation of about 45 minutes, after which we concluded the interview over a cup of coffee. As I had already watched the documentary more than once, we could skip the basic questions about Théâtre Source and move on to the theme of art in relation to development. That is what I chose to focus on in this this section. However, in the discussion of the connections and disconnections created by Théâtre Source, I refer back to this interview in order to include Aguirre’s insights on the relation between Théâtre Source and the concept of connectivity.

Preparing for the interview, I read an interview with Aguirre in a Flemish newspaper. One of his statements intrigued me. The journalist asked him whether he believes social commitment should be one of the motives of an artist. Aguirre said that “a good work of art tells you something about the world” (Dekeyser 2016). Therefore, I asked him what he thinks Théâtre Source tells about the world, or more specifically Cameroon. According to him, it shows that the government does not provide its population with drinkable water. Worse still, they cannot complain because if they would, they might end up in prison. Aguirre indicated that to him the project was not only about providing clean water. It should also be interpreted as a “concealed complaint against the non-policy of the government” (Aguirre y Otegui 2018). This statement, suggests that Aguirre does not think of his project as merely turning an existing well into an artwork. His aspiration is not only to “beautify and decorate the district” (Pucciarelli and Cantoni 2017). Rather, he adopts the motto of doual’art, which states that urban art has a twofold effect: “Urban art does not only make the city prettier, it can also improve people’s lives” (Van den Bril 2015).

Théâtre Source can be seen as a means of development in two ways. As mentioned above, it ameliorated the existing situation in which the people from Ndogassi III did not have access to clean water. By doing so it, sent out a political message. Secondly, as other artworks established by doual’art did, Théâtre Source transformed the neighbourhood and had an effect on how people felt about where they lived (Pucciarelli and Cantoni 2017). In the documentary, one man expresses his pride explicitly: “The whole neighbourhood is proud” (Van den Bril 2015).
Why a short story?

John Law opens his book, titled *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*, as follows: “This book is about (...) what happens when social science tries to describe things that are complex, diffuse and messy. The answer, I will argue, is that it tends to make a mess of it. This is because simple clear descriptions don’t work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent. The very attempt to be clear simply increases the mess” (Law 2004, 2).

From the start of this research project, I realised that Law makes a good point. In my attempt to uncover the connections and disconnections created by *Théâtre Source*, it became clear to me that certain types of connections could be identified, but that it was impossible to understand all of them in detail, let alone describe them. The web of connections is simply too complex to disentangle. A short story seemed an attractive form to deal with this complexity. As Francis B. Nyamnjoh argues, it allows the “researcher to embrace a wider variety of perspectives and provide more nuanced and accurate accounts and explanations” (Nyamnjoh 2012). So that is what I did.

What I hope to achieve with my short story is that the reader gets an impression of the different ways in which *Théâtre Source* created connections between people. The key word is “impression.” It is not my objective to describe these connections. Rather, I aim to highlight some of my conclusions. By giving concrete examples and constructing characters the readers can identify with, I hint at the multiple connections established by *Théâtre Source* and try to make the readers understand the ways in which they affect the characters. In other words, I do not want the readers to know all there is to know about *Théâtre Source*, but I want them to get a sense of how *Théâtre Source* functions as a connection technology.

With my research project I endorse the objective of life-writing. This more recent literary and historical genre starts from the thesis that instead of trying to explain complex realities, scholars should attempt to understand them and make sure that their readers do so too (Oxifewriting 2018). It is a critique of the idea that academic research should be factual and unbiased by definition. This is an unreachable ideal, life-writers argue.

This insight is not new. In their article on life-writing, Adriaan van Veldhuizen and Dirk van Weelden show that this is a widely accepted thesis amongst philosophers of history. By way of illustration, they quote Louis Mink, who famously stated that “stories are not lived, but told.” Van Veldhuizen and van Weelden argue that imagination is necessary for every story to be told, because “life is not coherent. Only later on, when we tell the story, do we make it coherent” (van Veldhuizen and van Weelden 2016). In sum, both writing a short story based on extensive research and presenting the conclusions of the same research in an academic essay, presume adding a narrative to the single elements that make up the short story or essay.
Théâtre source as a connecting technology

My short story, Théâtre Source, recounts two days in the lives of three characters. The story continuously switches between each of their perspectives. The protagonist is Vanessa, a photographer who is in Douala for work. Unexpectedly, she has to stay longer. Her boss at the urban art magazine she works for, is intrigued by Théâtre Source. He wants Vanessa to go back and take more photographs, so he signs her up for an urban art tour organised by doual’art the next day. That is how Vanessa meets Christian, the second main character of the story. Christian is an art history student at the university of Douala and works as a guide for doual’art. The last character is actually a duo, Jasmine and Alex – mother and son. Every afternoon after school, they go to the well in Ndogpassi III to get water and do washing. In the end, all characters meet at Théâtre Source.

Connections and disconnections

I identify four main connections created by Aguirre’s art project Théâtre Source. To a certain extent, all of these feature in the short story. The story focusses on two connections (number 1 and 4 – see list further on), but hints at the other ones. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the newly created connections do not only connect people. Some of the connections can at the same time be interpreted as disconnections.

All in all, the following connections can be identified.

Connection between:
1. The people from Ndogpassi III who use the well
2. Doual’art and Aguirre
3. Aguirre and the people from Ndogpassi III
4. Ndogpassi III and the rest of the world
Théâtre Source already used to be a meeting point in this sense before Aguirre transformed the well. However, besides making the well more hygienic, the art project changed the nature of the well as a meeting point (Aguirre 2018; Koyo, Schoups and Swinnen 2015). At one point in his guided tour, Christian raises this point: “This is a place where people’s lives come together. It already was a meeting point before Philip Aguirre reconstructed it, but something changed. Now, people also meet here to chat and relax. At times the people from the neighbourhood even throw parties” (De Wilde 2018, 13-14).

A man interviewed in the documentary, elaborates on these new uses of the source: “It’s a meeting place. It’s a theatre. After the holidays, you could see the toddlers playing by the well. School reports are handed out there. One of my friends has already organised a small party there. A christening. It was fantastic” (Van den Bril 2015).

In the interviews I had with Van den Bril and Aguirre, both stressed that these neighbourhoods of Douala are anything but homogenous. The people that live in Ndogpassi III come from all over Cameroon or migrated from other African countries. There are also many refugees fleeing Boko Haram (de Aguirre 2018; Mehler, Melber and van Walgraven 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014). An interesting question to ask would be whether it can be said that Théâtre Source – by offering this neighbourhood a multifunctional meeting point – had an influence on the relations between the people in Ndogpassi III. In other words, could it be that Théâtre Source connected people that were disconnected before?

One of the points I try to make in my short story is that Théâtre Source is a meeting point. It is so on two levels – a local and a global one. The first and fourth connection respectively consider Théâtre Source as such.

In the local context, Théâtre Source’s function as a meeting point is very concrete. It is the place where people, mostly women and children, meet on a daily basis while they get water and do washing. Théâtre Source physically brings people together and fosters a form of copresence (Urry 2002).
On a global level, *Théâtre Source*’s function as a connecting technology transcends the local context. This concretely means that *Théâtre Source* is a place where people from within and outside Cameroon meet. In the story, *Théâtre Source* is the immediate cause for the encounter between Vanessa and Christian. Similarly, Aguirre’s work of art can be said to be responsible for Vanessa’s encounter with Jasmine and Alex.

It is important to note that such transnational encounters at the well are not implausible. Marta Pucciarelli and Lorenzo Cantoni (2017) state that *doual’art* has invested a lot in tourism, for instance by being the first one to create a city map. The goal is to get Western tourists to not only visit the most wealthy areas of Douala. Therefore, the art centre offers guided tours through Douala. On these tours, the guides show visitors around by leading them from one work of public art to another (Pucciarelli and Cantoni 2017).

In Van den Bril’s documentary, two interviewees refer to this touristic interest in *Théâtre Source*. As one woman states: “A lot has changed. People walk past here sometimes in the evening. They come to admire the artwork, the project.” Another woman relates: “It’s almost as if this has become a tourist attraction. People come to look at us. We have a tourist attraction now” (Van den Bril 2015). Reading between the lines, one gets the impression that the residents of Ndogpassi III feel very proud of having a work of art like *Théâtre Source* in their neighbourhood. The following quote supports this suggestion: “We had no idea that we could have something so beautiful in the middle of our neighbourhood. We’re happy. Really very happy” (Van den Bril 2015). Whereas this sense of pride arguably connects the residents of Ndogpassi III, it might also disconnect them from the residents of the surrounding neighbourhoods who have to do without such a tourist attraction. Even though my research did not directly indicate that this is the case, I do not rule out the possibility that *Théâtre Source* might have created jealousy amongst residents of other poor neighbourhoods and by doing so created a disconnection.
As mentioned, the second and third connection (see previous list) are not at the centre of the short story. That is not because they are less important. Rather, in the short story I chose to focus on the others, because they are less obvious. Nevertheless, during his guided tour Christian mentions both of the second and third connection. He recounts, for instance, how Aguirre was introduced to the founders of doual’art (De Wilde 2018, 10). Later on, when Michelle asked how the neighbourhood reacted to the plans for the art project, Christian explains how Aguirre and doual’art tried to involve the local residents (De Wilde 2018, 14-15). One way Aguirre tried to do this was by creating a form people could use to voice their opinions and suggestions (Koyo, Schoups and Swinnen 2015, 48). Aguirre and doual’art thus actively tried to create a connection with the local residents.

However, as both Aguirre and Van den Bril mentioned, this attempt to connect did not always work out. Some people, for example the men that were not hired as constructors, felt excluded and thus disconnected (Aguirre 2018) Others, did not feel excluded, but reacted indifferently (Van den Bril 2018). In the short story Christian concludes: “Anyhow, as the works progressed the little resistance there was disappeared. I think people saw that this work of art could be beautiful and practical at the same time” (De Wilde 2018, 15).

The functions of art

Of all the seven functions de Botton and Armstrong (2013) ascribe to art, at least two relate to the concept of connectivity. Those functions are “hope” and “rebalancing.”
Hope – According to de Botton and Armstrong, recognizing beauty in art gives people who struggle hope. Therefore, they argue that there is nothing wrong with liking a work of art just because it is pretty. As they see it: “If the world was a kinder place, perhaps we would be less impressed by, and in need of, pretty works of art. One of the strangest features of experiencing art is its power, occasionally, to move us to tears; not when presented with a harrowing or terrifying image, but with a work of particular grace and loveliness that can be, for a moment, heartbreaking” (de Botton and Armstrong 2013, 16).

As art offers hope, it can function as a means for people to connect with others in a similar situation and draw inspiration from that. This interpretation of the purpose of art relates to what Hervé Yamguen, one of the Cameroonian artists interviewed in the documentary stated: “Art has a right to exist anywhere, and especially in a community such as mine, where the roughness of life causes people to be exposed to terrible violence. To such an extent that their own human face is no longer recognizable. It’s so horrible that it causes any goodwill towards others to disappear completely. It just vanishes from their life, simply because people are too busy trying to survive. That’s why I am a firm believer that art has power over life. It has to have power over life. An artist’s work can capture people in such a way that it obliges them to take some time to reflect. Time for quietness and silence in their life. It allows them to see their dreams, the things they strive for every day, but can’t find. It all crystallizes out in that moment, in art” (Van den Bril 2015).

Rebalancing – With respect to this function of art, de Botton and Armstrong argue that “art has a role in rebalancing us emotionally” (de Botton and Armstrong 2013, 32). By this they suggest that what we look for in art are the things that are missing in our lives. As such it rebalances us. They give the example of a businessman who is busy all day long, but comes home to a “perfectly symmetrical and ordered one bedroomed house” (de Botton and Armstrong 2013, 32). The calmness he lacks during the day, he finds at home. According to de Botton and Armstrong, this is one explanation of why people differ so much in their aesthetic tastes.

“It is not only individuals who can use art to supply what is missing from life. Groups of people, and even societies, might look to art to balance out existence” (de Botton and Armstrong 2013, 34). In the case of Théâtre Source, one could therefore argue that community’s predominantly positive reactions stem from the fact that the work of art offers them something they miss in their lives, that is an open and clean space. Unlike the spot where Théâtre Source is located, the other parts of Ndogpassi III are very cramped (Koyo, Schoups and Swinnen 2015). It is quite likely that this is one of the reasons for Théâtre Source’s appeal as a meeting point where people enjoy to gather.
Conclusion

With my short story and accompanying essay, I hope to have achieved two diverse things. First, I hope to have made a convincing argument regarding the significance of studying urban art from the perspective of connectivity. I believe this view can add new insights to the existing literature, which studies urban art as a means of development. To that end, my short story intends to give the reader an impression of the four ways in which Théâtre Source created connections. This is done by providing concrete, but implicit examples. Consequently, the accompanying essay serves to make these four connections explicit. It elaborates on the connections and mentions some disconnections, but does not aim to describe them all in detail.

Second, as I started reading up on the history and current situation in Cameroon, I noticed that the general tone was very pessimistic. In the introduction of the Historical Dictionary of the Republic of Cameroon the author stated: “Cameroon is a land of much promise, but a land of unfulfilled promises. This medium-sized African country has the potential to be an economically developed and democratic society. But the struggle to live up to its potential has not gone well” (DeLancey, Neh Mbuah and DeLancey 2010, 1). By no means do I want to imply that Cameroon does not have any problems. The African Yearbooks I consulted, suggests the opposite (Mehler, Melber and van Walraven 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014).

Yet, that is not the story I want to tell. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s words, I do not want to write yet another version of the single story of Africa, which presents the continent as a catastrophe. Therefore, with this essay, I side with Adichie, with whom I could not agree more: “Of course, Africa is a continent full of catastrophes: ... But there are other stories that are not about catastrophe, and it is very important, it is just as important, to talk about them” (Adichie 2009).
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Most of the photographs included in the short story and this essay were taken by Koen De Waal. They are included in: Kouoh, Koyo, Martin Schoups, and Peter Swinnen. 2015. Théâtre Source. Philip Aguirre y Otegui. Antwerp: Ludion.