

The Polylogue

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Amsterdam Museum Journal

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Margriet Schavemaker

Prof. dr. Margriet Schavemaker (MS) received her education as an art historian and philosopher at the University of Amsterdam. In June 2024 Schavemaker started as General Director at the Kunstmuseum Den Haag. In this capacity she is also responsible for the Fotomuseum Den Haag, KM21 and the Escher Museum.

Nourhan Bassam

Asst. Prof. Dr. Nourhan Bassam (NB) is recognized as the first feminist urbanist. She is an architect and educator working at the intersection of gender, design, and urban transformation. Her work focuses on the intersection of feminist theory and the built environment through placemaking, participatory design methodologies, and urban policy frameworks. She is the author of *The Gendered City* and *Women After Dark*.

Katerina Gregos

Katerina Gregos (KG) is a curator, lecturer and writer originally from Athens, based in Brussels since 2006. Since the summer of 2021 she is artistic director of the National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST), Athens.

Simon(e) van Saarloos

Simon(e) van Saarloos (SS) is the author of *Against Ageism. A Queer Manifesto* (2023); *Take 'Em Down. Scattered Monuments and Queer Forgetting* (2021) and *Playing Monogamy* (2019) as well as several books in Dutch. Van Saarloos works as an independent curator of public programming and artistic collaborations.

Poornima Sukumar

Poornima Sukumar (PS) is a creative director, part-time artist, illustrator, and thinker with a deep commitment to community-driven art. She is the founder of the Aravani Art Project, an initiative dedicated to creating safe, inclusive spaces for transgender individuals, fostering self-expression and bridging societal divides.

Matylda Taszycka

Matylda Taszycka (MT) is a researcher and art historian, who uses her knowledge to improve female representation in the art world. She is able to pursue this mission as the Head of Research Programmes at AWARE, a nonprofit organization working to make women artists visible through research, programmes and archival work. In 2026, AWARE will become part of the Centre Pompidou.

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A polylogue on women, cities and art

In this roundtable, our guest editor Margriet Schavemaker comes together with Nourhan Bassam, Katerina Gregos, Simon(e) van Saarloos, Poornima Sukumar and Matylda Taszycka to discuss the relationship between women, cities and art.

During the conversation they explore how cities are gendered spaces, how designing out fear can designing in fear for other people. They touch upon the intricacies of representation and solidarity. Drawing on their diverse experience in artistic and academic practice, they explore varying methodologies and strategies to make the city to befit the needs of different city-dwellers.

In the conversation, Imogen Mills (editor of the Polylogue) and Rosanne van Ballegooijen (editorial support) invited the speakers to explore a broad range of themes: the right to the city, artistic practices and feminist strategies to navigating the city, how representation comes into the fold, how it affects the position of women in the city, and equally how the representation of queer and gender non-conforming people is appropriated by female representation by a using 'women' as a catch-all term. Finally, they discuss the return to the topic of placemaking and playmaking as a strategy for changing the city for your needs.

Who has the right to the city?

MS: The question I want to start with is what the relationship between women—women in the broadest sense, including trans, intersex, non-binary people—and your cities is like right now? It is a relevant question, fueled by your own experiences, but also by what is happening in your cities. Especially now in Amsterdam, the past months have been intense. There was the femicide of a young girl¹, that made people aware of the position of women in public spaces. So, what does the relationship between women and your city look like?

NB: I have a diverse sense of urban belonging, having lived for many years in cities around the world, from Amsterdam, Milan, Paris, and Dubai to Utrecht, Copenhagen, and Cairo. Growing up while constantly shifting my spatial surroundings and being perceived differently in each of these places made me deeply aware of how my positionality changes across contexts. I see that generally cities have historically been built on patriarchal values that determine who feels entitled to space and who is marginalized. Women and anyone who does not conform to traditional gender norms inherit these systemic inequities

in the built environment. Safety, access, and freedom of movement are not equally distributed; they are constantly negotiated in public spaces.

Recent events in Amsterdam have reminded us how urgent these issues are. Safety is at the forefront of discussions about women and cities: the right to the night, the right to linger, and the broader right to the city. Not long ago, women in public spaces were often seen as transgressive; a “public woman” was a label no woman wanted to carry. That legacy continues to shape inequities for anyone who does not fit into dominant norms.

As urbanists and designers, we must ask ourselves: How can we create urban spaces where everyone, regardless of gender or identity, belongs and moves safely? Designing out fear is a responsibility we carry as urbanists, planners, and citizens committed to equity.

PS: I can relate to this situation from India, where safety has deteriorated drastically. There are streets where we are scared to walk, and our government is not acting on this. This is

what our collective is reacting to: we walk together, out front, so people can follow in safety. Aravani is collective that embraces transwomen and people from the LGBTQIA+ community. There is one crucial difference here between what we do and what Nourhan has noted. Initially, all our meetings happened in the evening, because it was only at night that people felt safe to come out.

There are several ways to approach the goal of making the city safe for all women: allowing sex workers and transgender individuals to be visible during the day and guaranteeing equal rights to access public spaces. For example, the government and the civic bodies must be willing to collaborate with artists and thinkers, who are already trying to make the city a better place and have new and innovative practices to achieve this. Apart from painting the spaces, the civic and development bodies can work with local artists and cultural practitioners to involve the local vendors, street hawkers, everyday women, and marginalized voices to create a space to share histories, happenings, lived experiences, interactive dialogues between the various communities that use that space.

Giving the city an identity based on its past, present and future will also make it more inclusive and the need to keep the space respected and safe. This is one of my approaches as well. But the challenges here are many; to start with finances to execute the work, funders and government bodies expect quick results, which is not always possible.

MS: I am looking at Simon(e), because it rhymes with the work you were referring to with 'cruising the night'. The city has

different phases at different hours: nighttime versus daytime. Simon(e), could you touch upon how you relate to the night?

ss: Yes, In Amsterdam, we have seen cruising bushes become heavily lit, open spaces for the sake safety, but cruising exists by the virtue of obscurity. For me, this is an important question: Which women are being considered here?

So, with that I would like to take up the point Poornima is making and relate it to what you were saying, Nourhan, about 'designing out' fear. The 'Take Back the Night' campaign was taken up after the femicide that took place in Amsterdam. But the idea of 'taking back the night' begs the question: Who gets caught in the crossfire?

Who feels safe in the night, because the day is not safe? What we see with the Take Back the Night campaign is that it is idealistically white, cis, and middle class. So, when you say, 'Take Back the Night', who are you taking it away from? This is where I think 'designing out' fear intersects with 'designing in' more fear for other people.

MT: I would like to return to the idea, mentioned earlier, that we do not all belong to the city in the same way. I have been living in Paris for more than twenty years, but I was born and raised in Poland, which is still, as you may know, one of the most conservative countries in Europe. When I think about the relationship between women and the city, three images come to mind. The first is the disappearance, in 2015, of Tęcza (The Rainbow), an installation by the Polish woman artist Julita Wójcik on Plac Zbawiciela in Warsaw. This public

sculpture, repeatedly set on fire and reconstructed, became a focal point of the culture war in the city and, more broadly, embodied the growing polarization of society. The second memory is that of the so-called "LGBT-free zones": municipalities and areas that officially declared themselves hostile to LGBTQ rights and banned events such as equality marches. These zones were abolished by the Polish courts in 2025, but the damage they caused remains. Yet they have also been reappropriated by a new generation of artists and activists, becoming an impulse to create tools and structures that support queer communities. The third image is that of Polish women and their allies occupying city centers during the massive protests against the anti-abortion law in 2020–2021, commonly known as the Women's Strike. In some situations, hostile public space can be reclaimed: not by negotiating it, but simply by taking it, by numbers. And yet, five years later, the restrictive abortion law is still in force.

NB: For those of us in urban design, architecture, and city planning, it is clear that patriarchal ideals are ingrained in the layout of streets, neighborhoods, and public spaces. What Simon(e) says of the 'Take back the Night' campaign is true for cities too. They have inherited a white, patriarchal structure. These inherited structures perpetuate a cycle of inequality, and it is our responsibility to question them and design cities that work for a broader spectrum of bodies and lives. But the first hurdle is to challenge these default prototypes.

So, when I started writing *The Gendered City*, I began with a questionnaire on

"How Cities Keep Failing Women." I quickly realized that cities are largely male and patriarchal in their design, much like broader societal structures. This framework shapes how different bodies navigate urban spaces, privileging a masculine prototype.

In my research, I received intersectional responses from people of different ages, sexualities, migration backgrounds, and social positions, which highlighted how experiences of urban space are deeply uneven. Safety, accessibility, and belonging are not universal; they are filtered through gender, race, age, ability, and other social factors.

ss: When we talk about designing cities, some debates get picked up more than others. For example, public remembrance through statues is something that is constantly being negotiated. I talk about commemoration in my book *Take Em Down: Scattered Monuments and Queer Forgetting*, where the idea of taking down monuments, the male statues, throughout the city, is not to replace them with female statues, but it is to take down the statues, let the rubble remain, and have the rubble be a form of disruption. René Boer's book *Smooth City [Against Urban Perfection, Towards Collective Alternatives]*² calls to disrupt the smoothness and smoothening of the city which often happens through the commodification of decolonial and feminist movements. It is a strategy where it is not about cleaning up the city, which often happens when we feminize the city and is often about adding names and still using the statue as a strategy. Instead, we opt for a new strategy for the city: leave the mess and live in its messy state.

MS: Nourhan, as a designer, how do you read that? Do you want more mess? Do you want to make the *detournement* more than smoothing out to make everything clear and accessible?

NB: I second Simon(e)'s stance. Feminist urbanism is not about radical steps or about making something nicer or aesthetic. Rather, it is about making incremental steps and reclamation, listening to communities, and designing from these principles. I want to go back to night life: in *Women after Dark*, I write about negotiating between the after dark city and migrant street vendors, sex workers, domestic workers, commuters, queer performers, and other marginalized groups. It is about the negotiation between positions of privilege and those without in the city. For example, surveillance is often used as a method for safety when it often makes different groups of people feel less safe. The research we do through the Gendered City focuses on diverse representations, and this method is about incremental steps that piece together to have a huge impact.

“Giving the city an identity based on its past, present and future will make it more inclusive.”

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Poornima Sukumar

Artistic practices and feminist strategies

MS: What artistic practices and feminist strategies can be deployed to change the system and change the role of women and gender nonconforming people in the city?

MT: I am thinking about the city, the public sphere, not only as a physical space composed of streets, squares, and public or private buildings, but also as a digital space that increasingly shapes our imaginaries and our political views. At AWARE we publish online content on women artists—and I insist on the fact that women are understood in the broadest sense. AWARE is a platform and recently, we opened it to a broader idea of what visual culture is, including architecture, design and applied arts. It allows us to deconstruct the idea of hierarchies in artistic and architectural practices, so that we can see names of women artists reappear through a process of *décloisonnement*—the breaking down of categories. By opening these domains, we can enlarge the idea we have of women's contributions in the cultural field. Obviously, adding names is like building new statues, not enough; it will not change anything politically in the long run if we do just this. However, it can be seen as the beginning of a process. I prefer to think of the immaterial engraving of these names as a way of creating a pedestal of role models. This does not mean that these creative

women were exemplary in their lives or work. Rather, it provides a basis for an international and an intergenerational dialogue, in the sense that it allows for a dialogue with the dead who have been forgotten.

SS: In the way I approach artistic practices, I try not to think about this from systematic change, but instead from insurgency in a particular moment. An example that I am thinking about is the calling cards that I made that address a queer intimacy. I write about intergenerational intimacies and being seen as a parent and child instead of two lovers with a large age gap. I made these calling cards inspired by Adrian Pipers' practice. They say, for example: "Dear friend, you have just misidentified my lover as my parent/child. Please reconsider that you do not understand everybody's intimacies." It is a very small moment of insurgency where I am not trying to change everybody's thinking or a large architectural perspective about intimacy; it is only that specific moment.

MS: Poornima, you make a very specific claim to use public architecture as a canvas to enable activist insurgence. Would you talk about this relationship between women and cities from your perspective and how art or design can change things?

PS: Art has been a very important way to occupy a space we were not yet present in. We realized the openness that people are willing to show for their community, only because of art. If there was no art, I do not know if we would have been as accepted as we are now as a collective. To be in a space where we are looked at for our social cause and our artistic collective has been very rewarding; to view nongendered, transgender and sex-workers as artists. We have a long way to go.

We began the collective at a time when art was not considered an option for marginalized people. When we began the collective, it was mostly self-funded because people could not understand the concept and the intention behind it. Slowly we started receiving interaction, opportunities, grants and commissioned projects within our own city, state and country. The progress was gradual, but very fulfilling, soon the collective was part of several projects, and it became a source of livelihood for the transgender artists who were otherwise depending on sex work and begging. The art world has its own values, but overall, it has been interesting for us to see the support that we have received as a collective.

MS: I think the point that you are making is very clear: This idea of a collective being in the urban sphere and not being allowed in the museum. Just like the city has different phases at different hours, the city has different levels of accessible spaces. In a museum, it is very interesting how it can be an institution of exclusion versus something that should be open to everyone.

KG: Yes, we do not occupy a marginal space in the city because a museum is, by definition, an institution that exercises power. Even if you garner that power into civic engagement, it remains power, nonetheless. We try to harness that power responsibly. And what is urgently needed is an attempt at unlearning problematic attitudes towards women and queer people.

I call this approach correctional historiography: a renegotiation of problematic histories and entrenched beliefs. As a public museum, we have the privilege of having a platform free from political interference and private interest. This gives us the rare opportunity to generate discourse of our choosing that will ripple out into broader society.

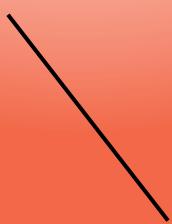
We are a democratic museum: there are nearly no barriers for entry, our entrance fee is low, all our public programming is free, we are in the center of the city, open and accessible. This means we have a large flow of visitors that enables an intersectional approach.

So, what do we do with this power and this diverse visitor base? We launched a year-long program entirely dedicated to women's voices. For an entire year, we focused exclusively on women's discourse, women's art and women's film. We went all out, engaging the public in every possible way. Rehanging the collection with works by female artists was just one part. More importantly, we acknowledged a diversity of feminist perspectives, not just the Greek or Southern European female experience.

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Matylda Taszycka

Representation and perception of women

MT: At AWARE, we have discussed representation with many women artists born in the 1930s and 1940s who had no female or queer references when they began their careers. Instead, they had to construct their own genealogies from the fragments of information they could find. Finding other women in art history was not easy. The French feminist philosopher Geneviève Fraisse would call these lignées, lineages, to describe the ways in which we actively build, rather than passively endure, our political and artistic descent. A repertoire of names is also a way to give people the opportunity to create and understand the stories of women otherwise lost to history.

In this sense, the numbers are important because it gives us a history to refer to. This is especially important at the moment where we are in the middle of the battle of (political) imaginaries, providing images and occupying the public sphere and imaginary with these topics is important.

KG: Matylda, I relate to what you are saying because in the visual arts there is a paradoxical situation whereby all the directors of museums are women, their teams are made up of women, but in the history of arts, female underrepres-

sentation is sweeping. This is why we did the 'Women Rule the World' series, dedicated only to women or to people who identify as female. Although the city is a gendered space, these spaces are not being claimed by feminist and queer organizations. As a museum we are an open space for this. But still, there are many paradoxes: advances and entrenched prejudices at the same time.

One of the main problems we face is representation of Greek women in the media. It is extremely sexist and anachronistic. There is a lack of awareness of how we read these images, and that education is what we are trying to do.

MS: Wonderful, I think that is a beautiful bridge: we started with urban representation, but media representation is obviously extremely dominant. Matylda, how does your project relate to that?

MT: The online platform is about occupying space for all these names of women artists and a demonstration of numbers. The idea of AWARE, which was created in 2014 by Camille Morineau, was that one day we would achieve this 'critical number' when it would not be possible to use the argument that 'there were not enough women' to tell the story

of an artistic movement, architecture, design, media or generally any field. The digital tools are allowing us to broaden the access as it is free and bilingual (and soon trilingual, because we are translating contents to Japanese). It is also accessible in the sense that we pay attention to the language on the website: the content is not too hermetic and is addressed to professionals in the art field as well as to children.

MS: This ties into representation and being able to get a mass of imagery and monuments, if they are digital, virtual or real. This also ties in with what Katerina said. It is also about representation, and how women are represented. It is an interesting part of the discussion we have entered now. Do you create obscure places in the city that are permeable or non-permeable, or do you create open transparent spaces? Do you use the same language to counter the hegemonic voice? That is the question we are touching upon right now.

PS: It is interesting to apply this conversation to India (which is challenging because of our current political climate and right-wing dominance). We are trying to keep up with the work, but it is not easy.

In terms of laws, there are small provisions. But, when it comes to people's attitudes, we have faced major setbacks, especially around acceptance and creating space. That said, we are in a better place now than before. Currently, the bigger challenge is how gender is perceived in a country that is now the most populous in the world. Art is just one aspect of this struggle, and unfortunately, the art world in India is highly gatekept and extremely capitalistic. Museums and institutions often fail to

provide the right kind of support, so we constantly have to maneuver around these barriers.

What I am observing more and more, unfortunately, is a split: some women support other women, while others gatekeep opportunities. These are real experiences. Our collective does not function the way the art world expects a collective to function—we break a lot of the established rules. There are predefined norms and labels that we refuse to follow, and that makes people uncomfortable. Many still want to go by the book.

“Safety, accessibility, and belonging are not universal; they are filtered through gender, race, age, ability, and other social factors.”

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Nourhan Bassam

What if women ruled the world?

KG: I would like to pose a question to the panel. It was also the title of our year-long series: What if women ruled the world? I meet extraordinary women every day and I am constantly amazed by their capacity to operate on intellectual and emotional levels simultaneously. But this question lingers: Would we do it better? And if so, how would we do it better, especially politically?

MT: What if women ruled the world? I think there is a problem in the question and that has to do with the idea of 'ruling'. To me, the issue is not about gender but about the use and expression of power. After all, we have female leaders like Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen, both on the far right, which shows that simply having women in power does not guarantee progressive change.

This is why I believe feminism, queer studies, and decolonial studies are so important. They offer frameworks for imagining alternative ways of distributing power; ways that dismantle the very notion of dominating a domain. Intersectional approaches allow us to think about new methodologies, alliances, and communities that move beyond hierarchical models of control.

ss: I love Katerina's proposition and Matylda's complication of 'ruling'. I would like to further complicate it, by complicating

the concept of world, and the universalism that hides within that. I am thinking through more disintegrated, temporal strategies rather than system-based approaches. This is something I explored in the calling cards, for example: these small temporal interventions instead of overarching structures.

This also ties into the category of woman. In the U.S., being at an exhibition celebrating women would, in that context, signal solidarity. Not in a gendered sense, but in a political sense. In the Netherlands, where institutional access has historically been broad, the attitude is different: showing up does not necessarily signify solidarity because everyone is assumed to have access. That difference matters. For me, the question becomes: how do we think through political solidarity rather than through fixed gender categories? Instead of asking, "Is this a man or a woman?" we should ask, "What does solidarity look like here?"

Finally, I want to raise a caution about inclusive language. Throughout this conversation, we've said "women," and of course we mean to include trans women, non-binary, and intersex people. But we need to be careful that inclusivity doesn't collapse important distinctions. When do we aim for differentiation rather than conflation? That's a question

I would like to leave on the table.

MS: Thank you for bringing that up. We also need to talk about internalized patriarchy. Many of us have experienced power abuse and misogyny not only from men but also from women, non-binary, and queer people.

I have spoken publicly about this before: over the past 10 years, I have gone through a major shift. I returned to the feminist roots I was raised with, after spending a long period trying to “be one of the guys.” I eventually flipped that mindset, and I think internalized patriarchy is something we absolutely need to address.

I am always reminded of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s claim that ‘we should all be feminists’. She connects feminism to a broader, intersectional struggle that also connects to men. In my view, that means connecting feminism to decolonial practices, queer studies, to a broad understanding of struggle and progress.

NB: I come from a male-dominated profession, and something I have noticed is that it thrives on what the Dutch call the *krabbenmand mentaliteit* (the crab bucket mentality): when someone tries to climb up, others pull them back down. This dynamic is especially evident among women, who are often pitted against each other and feel pressured to adopt “male” traits to succeed.

This has contributed to a stigma around the word feminist. Being labeled a feminist is often synonymous with being difficult or being told to “tone things down.” In my workshops and lectures, ninety percent of participants are women, because feminist urban design is still perceived as a women’s issue

rather than a societal one.

The devaluation of feminine traits and feminist policies persists, making it easier for women to distance themselves from them. It is a cycle that reinforces the existing system.

KG: Nourhan’s point is crucial: internalized misogyny and the lack of female solidarity go hand in hand. The most dangerous aspect of this is that patriarchy has remained so strong because it excels at maintaining unshakable male networks. That solidarity is a given. Women’s solidarity, on the other hand, is not. It is something we constantly have to claim, discuss, and remind ourselves to uphold. At all times, we need to be vigilant about not undermining ourselves.

ss: I have been thinking through gossip and the informal communication flows that are reminiscent of power—the kinds of non-respectable communication that we are not supposed to have. In relation to the internalized patriarchy, which Katerina was also referring to, this idea of being non-respectable together as women can support political solidarity. How can we move the way we support and hold space for each other to professional spheres?

“Feminism as an intersectional struggle means connecting it to decolonial practices, queer studies, and to a broad understanding of struggle and progress.”



Margriet Schavemaker

Playmaking the city

MS: The context for this discussion is 'Women of Amsterdam: An Ode'. The entire project consists of a digital platform, a letter writing campaign, an exhibition, publication, and this journal. Our methodology for this project is co-creation. The starting point was the larger narrative of Amsterdam's 750th anniversary, in 2025. Within the Amsterdam Museum this raised the question: How do we participate in a way that is relevant? How do we raise our voice?

The project was about placemaking and creating a monument to all the forgotten and invisible women in the city, who are absent from our collections. We designed it to be participatory and playful: people could write odes and letters to women they felt should be included in the city's history.

Accessibility is a question that is central to the Amsterdam Museum. As a network museum, it is important to engage with communities outside of the city center. So, the museum works with communities in Noord, Nieuw-West, and Zuidoost. For this project we worked with the existing women's networks in these boroughs. Instead of working from the city center and assuming relevance we asked: What do you need? How can we open up? This approach has led to 4.000+ odes.

I am interested to more about all of your placemaking and playmaking strategies, Matylda, maybe we can start with you.

MT: AWARE has been interested in works by women artists in public space in Paris. Although many people assume they do not exist, they are in fact quite numerous, yet often poorly preserved and in bad condition. For many women sculptors (frequently rejected or ignored by the art market and museums), public commissions were a way to make a living. Some of them are very well known today, such as Niki de Saint Phalle, for whom working on a monumental scale was essential, and whose Stravinsky Fountain, created with Jean Tinguely, remains a landmark. Others are more familiar to art historians, such as Élisabeth Ballet or Marta Pan, and, unfortunately, many today seem completely forgotten.

AWARE has organized guided walks (sometimes performed in collaboration with living artists) through the city to draw attention to these treasures, including highly historical ones by sculptors such as Hélène Bertaux, Claude Vignon, and Marie-Louise Lefèvre-Demier, who participated in the 'Nouveau Louvre' project (1851-1936).

It is also important not to overlook more

ephemeral and activist approaches, with artists such as Tania Mouraud or Jenny Holzer, to name only two examples, or the various collective campaigns against sexual violence and femicide. AWARE has also published several texts on this topic, extending its focus to other geographical contexts such as Mexico or Colombia.

MS: Thank you, Matylda. Poornima, I have become fascinated by your strategies because they are so playful. Could you tell us more about your placemaking and playmaking strategies?

PS: We initially focused on street spaces like the red-light districts and the ghettos where the transgender community lives. We paint murals in these places and use proverbs that are used to tease and discriminate against transgender people.

We use these moments of anger in a fun way to make the younger generation of transgender people feel they do not have to remain silent if they are discriminated against. We make gifs and graphic novels and use history and methodology related to the community. We often go back to the past, because before we were colonized, transgender people were very much part of our society.

The Aravani Art Project has provided a space for them to discuss their lives. That can vary from the violence they experience the night before, and the way they exercise self-determination.

In terms of placemaking and our practice, it all relates to our everyday life. Our art practice is about honoring our everyday lives, and see how we can put those stories into the work we do. We work with so many different commu-

nities that span India, and it is beautiful to visualize these stories according to the culture and the themes they connect with. That is what is necessary in a process of collaboration. Too often we see transgender people are not acknowledged. But when we collaborate with them or put them in touch, more weight is given to their knowledge. We make them part of the process and that enables them to lead projects of their own, which was always the point of the project. We want to enable them to sustain themselves and have the option to continue or quit at any point.

MS: I hear you echoing Matylda and Simon(e) in emphasizing that these communities are not monolithic, they consist of diverse contexts and positionalities. You are highlighting, as they did, that it's not just one unified world but many overlapping and distinct realities.

Being mindful of this brings us back to co-creation, which I really value. It also connects to Simon(e)'s point about solidarity: it starts from recognizing that diversity exists on multiple levels, which makes things complex. For instance, when we talk about femininity or "the female," it can imply a single, unified group. Yet what we keep circling back to is that this is not the case, and we need to grapple with that. It involves power imbalances and, at the same time, celebrating diversity. The question becomes: how do we navigate this paradox?

NB: In the Gendered City we started a feminist placemaking program which rejects the idea of simply "add women and stir", as if that were a magic recipe. Instead, it focuses on changing the process itself. We ask: What is participation? Who is participating? I believe play

is feminist because it refuses a single, rigid way of doing things. It creates feedback loops and affirms joy, care, and urban experiences. It also asks who is missing from participation and why.

The goal is to diversify how participation happens and how communities engage. This includes a mix of activism and art that champions the creativity and innovation of people and communities in ways that have not been heard before. It means taking off our architect and urban designer “hats” and letting go of prejudices and assumptions. It is about creating safe conversational spaces grounded in feminist values. This is the essence of the feminist discussions we have been developing to work with diverse communities.

We know these communities are extremely diverse. That is why we are launching the Feminist Design Academy for feminist placemaking in Mexico City. This approach is not one-size-fits-all. It involves exploring with communities through mapping, walking, and feminist night walks to understand emotional and sensory experiences of public life from different perspectives.

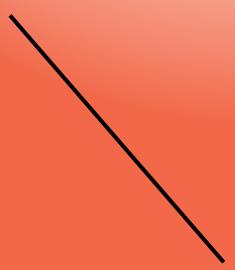
ss: I love the idea that if play is a feminist practice, then it does not have to succeed. This is the idea that I have been working with, that it does not have to have systematic effect.

Recently, I have been thinking about Fumi Okiji’s theory on despair, which she writes about in *Billie’s Bent Elbow*. She argues that despair should not trigger a response of resolution, but instead we should stay with the despair. This is why I love Katerina’s proposition and the frustration of it not being answerable. I

think this extends to what we do: instead of answering our questions, issues and paradoxes with a progressive developmental impulse of trying to create a better city or a better institution, we should dwell on the despair. It is hard, perhaps even impossible to achieve these ideals.

This connects to another idea: there is already an abundance of knowledge in the world, as Poornima noted. There is a wealth of knowledge embedded in trans people’s lives, yet it is often not recognized as knowledge. Living with impossibility is already part of these experiences.

“Instead of answering our questions, issues and paradoxes with a progressive developmental impulse of trying to create a better city or a better institution, we should dwell on the despair. It is hard, perhaps even impossible to achieve these ideals.”



Simon(e) van Saarloos

Endnotes

- 1 In the early morning of August 20th, 2025, a young girl was violently murdered by an attacker as she cycled home to a suburb of Amsterdam after a night out in the capital. The case received widespread coverage and sparked a debate about the safety of women in public spaces. [nytimes.com/2025/08/27/world/europe/amsterdam-murder-lisa.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/27/world/europe/amsterdam-murder-lisa.html)
- 2 René Boer took part in the polylogue A Polylogue on Deconstructing Gentrification for the second edition of Amsterdam Museum Journal, where he discussed themes from his Smooth City. assets.amsterdammuseum.nl/downloads/The-Polylogue-on-Gentrification-1753812634.pdf?_gl=1*nlgmx4*_up*MQ..*_ga*OTc0MzM4MjUx-LjE3NjMONzUzMzg.*_ga_8079F9V0J7*czE3N-jMONzUzMzckbzEkZzAkdDE3NjM0NzUzMzckajYw-JGwwJGgyMzgyMDYxOTg.