

Before the Collective existed, people didn't die; they simply disappeared

By Collectif Les Morts de la Rue / Straatdoden Brussels

“Before the Collective existed, people didn't die; they simply disappeared”

Tuesday, 2 pm, at a day centre open to homeless people in the morning for coffee, a cloakroom, a launderette, a social support service, and so on.

In the afternoon, the centre operates by appointment, so it's quieter and we can use one of the rooms. We are the Brussels Street Deaths Collective. There are about fifteen of us who meet up every first Tuesday of the month. We share coffee, fruit, biscuits, catch up on each other's news, and celebrate Twelfth Night, birthdays, and so on.

Our meetings always begin by discussing the deaths we've heard of since the last meeting. On average, we hear of six to seven deaths a month. How were the funerals handled? How did they go? Were we informed in good time? Was the timetable adhered to? Did we have time for a ceremony? By attending funerals organised by local authorities, we see what is wrong: unmarked graves, inappropriate behaviour, timetables not being followed, and so on. And we take action. When we identify areas for improvement, we regularly request meetings with officials from the local authorities or cemeteries (there are 19 in the Brussels region). We meet with hospital services, social workers, cemetery staff and police services.

Then, inspired by these deaths, other ideas come to mind: a notebook in which people living in precarious circumstances could write down their last wishes; painting pebbles to place on graves in the cemetery; taking part in various events; watching a film together; putting on a show; and even a celebratory evening to mark our 20th anniversary.

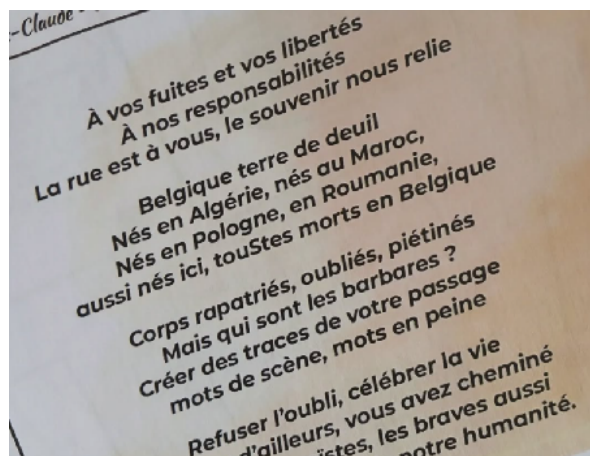
These deaths are what bring us together. They affect us personally (we are citizens, social workers, artists, people who have experienced life on the streets; who have lost friends, parents, and brothers, from living on the streets). Most of us came into contact with the Collective following a death and subsequently wished to get involved. Coming together around these deaths is an opportunity to take action, to move beyond sadness and anger. To reclaim these issues. The dead spur us into action.

We identify strongly with the ideas of the Belgian philosopher Vinciane Despret, who believes that *“the dead can help the liv-*

ing to transform the world” (*Les morts à l’oeuvre*, Editions La Découverte, 2023). On an individual level, we do not forget them so that their deaths are not in vain.

But it is also an opportunity to come together as a collective. To ensure that these farewells are not just for isolated individuals, but involve civil society, transforming an individual tragedy into an act of collective and political solidarity. To learn, or relearn, how to listen to one another. To hear others’ realities. To imagine solutions. To organise, come together, and forge connections. To make decisions, together. To imagine and experience the collective. To experiment with democracy. But also, to look after one another, ourselves, and the group.

We also keep these deceased alive in the public space through the Street Tree of the Dead, a living monument planted right in the city centre. We gather there to read poems and chant the names of those whose deaths we learned of the previous year. We hang objects in memory of each of these people (80 in 2026). Objects made during art workshops in a night shelter.



Poetry plays an important role in our collective. In Belgium, a politician recently said that our country should be run by engineers, not poets. We see on a daily basis how the world—and in this case, death—functions when it is managed solely according to an ‘engineering’ logic: schedules, efficiency, profitability, timesaving, and so on. Like that person buried an hour early to fill a gap in a schedule; those graves left unmarked for several months because the screws needed to attach the nameplates to the crosses were missing; those ceremonies held around a grave that

had already been closed because the schedules hadn’t allowed time for a ceremony...

In the face of this, we offer resistance through our actions. For us, slowness, gentleness, care, the pursuit of beauty, connections, creativity – all of these things that take time, and which have shaped our civilisation – are our priorities. The work of our Collective also serves to curb systemic and institutional violence, thereby protecting the bereaved from some of this violence.

For the past fifteen years or so, a poem has been written in memory of every person whose passing we learned of, and these poems are read out at the ceremony we organise every spring. In recent years, these poems have been written during writing workshops by anyone who wishes to take part. Writing is a skill that can be discovered and practised at any age, and poetry is an accessible art form. It allows us to highlight the beauty or ugliness of the world, to speak out, to play with words. These workshops are co-led by a ‘street poet’ and bring together up to 10 people. The poems are then read aloud by several voices during the annual ceremony.

To celebrate its 20th anniversary, the collective organised one of its “gesticulated evenings”. Six people involved in the collective undertook training, then shared “gesticulated anecdotes” – a blend of theatre and lecture, of lived experience and academic knowledge, of theory and personal stories – to recount their experiences of life on the streets, of poverty and dignity, and of facing death, without taboos, in a packed theatre. This allowed us to reach an audience that is usually far removed from our realities, and in an unexpected way.

In conclusion:

Twenty years after its founding, the ‘Collectif *Les Morts de la Rue*, Brussels’ demonstrates that remembrance is a political act. Through our presence, our demands on the authorities and the telling of our life stories, we force society to face the reality of life on the streets. These “dead who spur us into action” compel us: they bring us together as a united collective, transforming personal grief into a collective struggle for dignity.