

Art works

Making *interesse* public

Henk Oosterling

Is there not a need to adjust the relation between art and public space in virtual times? Once foreign-born artists or graphic design companies, for example, have access to the same sources of subsidy as regular artists, a conflict arises not only between different working methods but also different conceptions of art. Is an artistic fountain designed by a Moroccan art broker an autonomous art work, a socialization project or a local-global concrete realization of the interaction between cultures? Is multicultural facade architecture an example of art in the public space or are these just architectonic frills calculated to rake in indirectly subsidies? Is a web site project with school children art in the public space? Is the prospective marriage between two homosexual artists art, when it is presented as an art project in the epitome of a public site, the Rotterdam town hall?

One thing is sure – talking about ‘art *in* the public space’ in our informational network society (Manuel Castells), where the concepts of ‘public’ and ‘space’ have undergone a qualitative change, is to say the least problematic. Bearing this in mind, I propose a fourfold differentiation of this relation in the hope of opening up a space for other strategies on the basis of other relations. Besides the conventional notion of ‘art *in*’, I distinguish ‘art *of* the public space’, ‘art *as* public space’ and – with the aestheticization of the urban fabric in mind – ‘public space *as* art’. In this way new positions emerge, modernist categories such as ‘autonomy’ and ‘politics’ take on a significance more geared to the current dynamics of globalization and the roles of the contributing parties at any rate undergo a shift.

Initiating autonomy

The aestheticization of the public domain is not a question of outward appearances. It is not about an occasional facelift. Appearance here is not opposed to being. As experienced quality, ‘appearance’ has an immediate impact on social interactions and economic transactions. Appearance effectuates reality and is now called ‘virtuality’. Art is an active player here – for instance, with collective designs of an aesthetics of existence by groups that create specific forms of semi-publicness, geared to their own felt desires. This was unintentionally understood by the anarcho-capitalistic tribo-narcissist Joep van Lieshout. His *AVL-ville* in Rotterdam is a micropolitical tactic inspired by the subcultural ideology of the early 1980s.

Meanwhile, the subcultures have themselves become aestheticized. The various aesthetics of existence would seem to coincide fully with the kind of lifestyle packages Naomi Klein debunks in *No Logo*. In vain, according to critics, since she can no longer point to any centre of macropolitical power. Artistic interventions are increasingly imbued with the dynamics of the society of the spectacle. It may once have been possible to believe that art could be ideologically emancipating for blinded and ignorant fellow citizens; the concern now is to make urban mobility ‘*sens-able*’: art enables us to experience the workings of power to which everyone is exposed on a daily basis while at the same time playing an active role in the situation. Art has become radically hypocritical. The Outside has ceased to exist.

With the deconstruction of the concept of the ‘political’, that of ‘autonomy’ is similarly thrown off balance. Artists who work in public space are obliged to pay a price in terms of autonomy.

That which was always self-evident for graphic designers and architects now applies to the artist who is dependent on commissions. The highly contentious ‘liaison dangereuse’ between the practices of art and the business world that, driven by the need for publicity and house styling, is itself becoming aestheticized, turns artists into small art entrepreneurs. What art courses once called ‘autonomous’ has been swallowed up in the design and management of virtual environments.

Yet autonomy turns out to be a scale notion. It may have ceased to be a shockproof foundation – if it ever was – but as a practice it still exists. However, I call this ‘initiating autonomy’: the launching and communicating of concepts and ideas for interactive processes by which the design process may proceed in the direction that the artist desires, but where the outcome is nonetheless the result of the dynamics of all the parties involved. Initiating autonomy is a form of ‘imagineering’ (Kodwo Eshun).

Public space as art, art of the public space

In light of the above, what is this ‘art in the public space’ all about? Public space has long ceased to be a site reserved for heroes and victims. There is no longer any question of recollecting or remembering or even of reflecting. For some – like Centres for visual arts, for instance – A twofold realizing – acknowledging and materializing - remains an option. As the main providers of subsidies at a local level, they continue making the production of identities their aim, similar to the house styling of companies. To the degree that the identity of the city or neighbourhood with heterogeneous groups of residents becomes more diffuse and mobility increases, the accent of the identity of a city or neighbourhood shifts to that of specific ‘sites’. Even sinister sites are being made public again through the use of artificial interventions that rid them of their threatening aura.

From a cultural-political perspective therefore art *in* the public space is still implicitly credited with the power to call a halt to the fragmentation of social reality – the inevitable result of migrations of populations and labour forces, that are moreover peculiar to the Dutch ‘identity’. The site, that was once the inspired space for a ‘museological’ intervention in the public domain (the ‘site-specific’ work) has now become the exclusive scene of shared public experience. In this way the historicity of it can be *communicated*. The large-scale project *The Grand Terp*, that was linked to a museum presentation, *Hell and Heaven*, both of them curated by Peter Greenaway at the invitation of the province of Groningen, is one of the most spectacular expressions of in(ter)ventive site-art at the present moment. Intervention in the public space always entails invention of ‘publicness’.

As if it were site-specific theatre, comparable with the work of the Dutch theatre group, Hollandia, Greenaway theatricalizes the history of the site, in this case the environs of Groningen. A variety of artistic media and technologies are deployed using an intermedial approach in order to engage as much as possible with the visitors’ sensory apparatus. In this perception, the viewer also becomes an actor – a ‘spectator’ (Emil Hvratin). The presentation is embedded in layered data flows that keep everything in motion. With a wink to Derrida, I call this set-up ‘informance’. Visitors were told about Groningen’s traditional water management (macro politics: the hydrological imperative of the Netherlands) in the light of future planning decisions. By relating the artwork *in* the public space – the *terp*¹ – to the *museum* presentation in the Groninger Museum, the public space is itself presented *as* art.

The site can however also be presented as a crossroads of socio-economic transactions and cultural interactions. As a trajectory it does not bridge the difference between the local and the

global – rather one could say that it cuts through it. With some conceptual flexibility, Rotterdam 2001 European Cultural Capital can be thought of as such a trajectory. Inspired by Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, the city has been transformed into a politico-cultural *Gesamtkunstwerk*, ensuring itself of a politico-economic future partly on the basis of its past and partly on that of a socio-cultural present. AS A total work of art, art object and public space once more coincide, but in a different fashion. Following on from the 'public space as art' we can speak here of 'art of the public space' – 100 years of social housing, dance parades, museological and celebrity presentations, politico-cultural debates and multicultural events.

Art AS public space: the 'inter'

In light of the above, what, apart from historicized and globalized identity, might be a more contemporary micro-political target for art *in* the public space? Museological sculpture routes are not sufficient to render the tension between the local and the global 'SENSABLE'. What's more, in an exponentially accelerating visual culture and information society every static image speedily erodes unless it is museologically conserved. The process by which information and communication visually interweave would appear to be the only constant. The work itself can only become public space in as much as images speak experientially to a *communicated* imagination. It is then that art *in* the public space works *as* public space. This gives rise to all kinds of interfaces between art in the public space – the filling of communicated space with an identifiable image, a piece of steel rising out of the ground or an architectural ornament – and art *of* the public space or public space *as* art. In(ter)ventive effects of the work create these transitions. 'Participation' and 'interactivity' are key notions here. On closer inspection *artworks* turn out to be a reflexive verb before petrifying into a noun: ART WORKS.

The question now is whether interactive processes can become a basis for experience. In a world of difference, the tensions that abound in both multicultural society and the globalizing international culture, philosophically speaking constitute an 'in between' or an 'inter'. This concept loses its trendy character once it is applied concretely to dismantle traditional opposites such as private and public, past and future, virtual and real or local and global. In fact every form of 'publicness' develops within these fields of tension.

As a philosophical entity, the 'inter' was launched by Deleuze and Guattari around 1980. We encounter the ongoing impact of their ideas not just in recent books such as *Empire* by Hardt and Negri – with some exaggeration presented as one of the manuals of the current anti-globalization movement – but also in the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's most recent books. *Sphären*, a three-volume work of some thousands of pages in which the Deleuzian 'inter' is applied in affirmative fashion together with Heidegger's 'Zwischen' (in-between) in order to provide an in-depth analysis of the issue of globalization. We are 'in-between people', according to Sloterdijk – the primacy of an 'inter' precedes the individual.

The Infrastructural embedding of creative in(ter)ventions

In the question of the ontological status of the in-between, there is precious little scope for engagement in art: *interesse*. If, however, art and public space relate to each other in a fourfold fashion, this means that the roles of the 'parties' concerned keep on shifting. Who will take the initiative for which *artwork*: autonomous initiating artists, a participating public, deregulating authorities or a 'logo'centric sponsoring business community? Where does 'art' begin to work? In the brain or studio of artists who then apply for a grant and a site? With the request of residents who want to provide their own place with an aesthetic marker? Behind the office-doors

of the authorities who see it as their responsibility to regulate social tensions? Or behind those of the art director who has been hired to present his client's project to the general public in a more humorous fashion than hitherto? It seems to me that the 'inter' is also applicable to this infrastructure and that artworkS in the public space stands or falls depending on the inventive organizing of a micro-political *interesse* on the part of all parties involved.

1. A 'terp' is a specific Dutch concept/term for an artificial mound, dug for protection against military onslaught or flooding.