

The Art of Publics

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In these texts art theoreticians Jeroen Boomgaard and Sher Doruff [onlineopen.org/fielding-misunderstanding] take a bifurcating approach to art praxis in public space from a Dingpolitik point of view. Two distinct vectors, one speculative and the other practical, explore and ‘transduce’ the current exigencies of artmaking in the public sphere and the relevance of the thing as it is made and as it continues to make. What’s happening now to the affective before and after of the work of art and the practices that inform it? Referencing key concepts from Bruno Latour (instauration matters of concern, making things public), Isabelle Stengers (ecology of practices) and Gilbert Simondon (transduction), issues concerning the current state of affairs of public space art praxis are fielded, considered and argued, marking a dynamic oscillation between making things public and things making publics.

It would seem that the public domain is becoming more and more public: the government is pulling back and now only watches over safety and hygiene. In this ostensible operation – after all, the public has just as little to say about public space as it did before – works of art play an uncomfortable role. At first sight, they are an obvious victim in the prevailing tendencies towards popularization, for they have hardly any function and their presence is not a necessity. While the size, location and shape of almost all elements in the public domain (buildings, traffic signs, crowd flows, benches, trees, security cameras, no-trespassing areas, youthful loiterers) can be substantiated by appealing to ‘the facts’, the placement of an art work always seems to be the result of wishful thinking and arbitrariness. There is seldom a demand for it, nor does it offer any solutions. This is why some voices in the political world have called for the abandoning of such public art entirely, or leaving its selection up to local residents. Then, at least, the legitimacy of its placement would be guaranteed.

No matter how contested, and no matter how much administrators and leaders can also run into difficulties because of it, the instigating of all sorts of forms of art in the public domain still mainly turns out to be seen – in the Netherlands, anyway – as a task of government. This is at odds with official policy, which increasingly has determined that art should be left to the workings of the market. Art in public space is apparently an exception, an exception that is hard to legitimize and one that administrators would actually prefer to avoid, but which they somehow see as an inescapable part of our democracy.

The direct connection between the government and art in public space not infrequently leads to the labelling of art there as 'state art' rather than 'street art'. There is much to be said for this, but it does immediately raise the issue of the character of the state that is represented by such art. Artistic representation of the ruling power of a nation or community has a long history, which can be interpreted as one of the forms in which the state makes itself public. ¹

Moreover, this always involves the representation of a community that does not actually exist, but whose existence is assumed, desired or intended. These images always suggest an implicit ideal, and in a certain sense they are performative. This is also true of the art in our public space: its diversity, the extent to which such works of art are coquettish or confrontational, self-referencing or altruistic, is a good indication of the kind of society we supposedly live in. This art indeed represents the state, but a state that not only opts for recognizable and unifying images, but also and particularly considers exception and deviation, the unexpected and the unobserved, as characteristics of its existence. ²

The fact that the public does not directly and never completely recognize itself in these images is thus not strange in itself. What is strange is that this is often used to substantiate the conclusion that there is 'too little support' for a particular work of art. The government, however, is not just responsible for the realization of an art work; sharing and communicating its reasons for considering the work a matter of concern so that it has a chance of getting the desired support is also part of its tasks. By making it clear that works of art in the public domain not only serve 'to make things public', but that this also is a case of 'things making publics', their role in the creation of a network of public space can be strengthened.

Before/After

Before a work of art acquires a place in public space, it already is a matter of concern. In this process of 'instauration', as Latour calls it, a whole network comes into being, a network of people, things and ideas that contribute to a result that is never entirely foreseeable. Seen in this light, it is not surprising that so many art projects and large exhibitions have sought a place in this domain over the past decades. Everything that the art world laboriously tries to include in its practice is here in abundance. An art work or an art event in this 'space' generates a complex network of what already exists and what can come into being, a network of insiders and innocents, of surprises and frustrations. However, as Latour states, such a network can only remain viable and give life to an art work as an object if it does not shut out something or someone before the work comes into being. ³ That has far-reaching implications. Precisely because it wants the work of art to be a matter of concern in the public domain, the network that is formed in tandem with the work should be open to everything and everybody. That does not literally mean participation per se, any more than it means that the art work must come about through voting. Often, such procedures sooner work as a system of exclusion (participation focuses on a certain group/the voting just so happens to have led to this definitive result). It is precisely during the process of creation that the work of art in public space can gain the concern that it is so often denied later on.

In *What is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, Latour provides a few conditions that these matters of concern must meet. Applied to the art practice in the public domain, they clarify what is often lacking. First of all, according to him, it must be clear for whom the matter is of concern, but this remains rather vague in the practice of public art. Afraid of responsibility as people generally are, this 'concern' is tossed back and forth like a hot potato, only to end up on the plate of those least aware of it: the residents/users of the area. According to Latour, matters of concern have to *matter*, they have to lead to emotional reactions, and they have to be open for discussion, for only then can they have real meaning. And with works of art in public space, this is where it often goes wrong,

because commissioners are inclined to interpret a negative reaction as rejection and defeat and not as the beginning of a productive difference of opinion. Finally, Latour states that matters of concern must be 'populated' by people and things, that they must be durable for a long period of time and that they must be taken care of, or as he puts it, they must be 'saved'.⁴ A thing, to not become abandoned as an arbitrary object, an exaggerated obstacle testifying to lost ambitions, art in public space must not only assemble a network around itself before and during the making process, but also, and perhaps primarily, afterwards. So the question for a city district or housing corporation must not only be 'How do we manage to put an art work there?', but 'How do we ensure that the object stays there?'. Art in the public domain survives by attracting so much (people, things, care, looks, ideas, feelings) to itself that it does not shrink but grows, that the publicly made thing transforms into a thing that makes publics. The question, however, is how this process of transduction can work out in practice.

A Fortunate Misunderstanding

In her 'ecology of practices', Isabelle Stengers assumes that practices are focused on themselves and act in self-interest. Art is a practice that claims to act in the general interest, but its tragedy is that this is scarcely recognized. In public space, where art is harshly confronted with other practices, this comes to light. Not only in the lack of recognition and respect that a completed work is met with, but already before that, in the expectations and demands of commissioners, and in the implementation practices that are necessary in order to realize it. This harsh confrontation is generally the sad fate of many works of art in the public domain can largely be blamed on the lack of these last conditions. For commissioners, intermediaries and also for artists, the realization of the work is the most important thing and everything that happens after that is simply a question of physical maintenance. But to survive as seen as a necessary evil, a head wind that the artist must face in order to be able to actualize his or her own practice. But just as the profusion of everything that already exists, or can exist, in the public domain offers art the chance to be a matter of concern, the continual clashes with practices that strive for very different goals and obey very different rules is also precisely the condition that makes it possible for art in public space to have a different existence than the exciting but commonplace life of art in the gallery and exhibition practice.

But the most fruitful meeting with other practices happen when a work is completed and takes its place in the public domain. At that moment, it can acquire a meaning that neither the commissioner nor the artist could have foreseen, a meaning that generally is based on a misunderstanding. Stengers: 'Indeed the "ecology of practices" practice first implies that whatever its good will, its practitioners will not cross the border of the practice it addresses without a transformation of the intention and aim of the address, what is often called misunderstanding. And the practical certainty of misunderstanding is something ecology of practice has to affirm with no nostalgia for what would be a faithful communication.'⁵ The possibility of a misunderstanding is the principal power of works of art in the public domain, precisely because they are situated on that intersection of practices. What's more, this is a misunderstanding that is unpredictable. It does not arise because the artist has wanted to 'show the world in a different light' or to 'put the viewer on the wrong track'. Viewers are always on the right track, their own, and in appropriating an unfamiliar image they take steps that they might not have otherwise taken.

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Footnotes

1. See Dario Gamboni, 'Composing the Body Politic. Composite Images and Political Representation, 16512004', in: Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Making Things Public* (Karlsruhe/Cambridge, MA /London, 2005), 162-195.
2. Also see Jeroen Boomgaard, *Wild Park. Het onverwachte als opdracht*, Essay 6 (Amsterdam: Fonds BKVB, 2011).
3. Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (Winter 2004), 225-248.
4. Bruno Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?* (Assen: Uitgeverij Van Gorcum, 2008), 47-49.
5. Isabelle Stengers, 'Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 11 (2005) no. 1, 183196.

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