Urban Interest
Art as Public Space

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Column – September 30, 2004

Everyone has had, at one point or another, a Proust experience: without your realizing it, a smell triggers a feeling of security or estrangement. You are moved or shaken by something. Deep in our brain stem something that we had forgotten is released. Only after some time does it manage to ***re***member the smell and identify this via images. The time lost becomes part of our biography.

Does the memory of the ***res publica***, of public affairs and their included space, work like an individual memory? Does public ***re***membrance also have something like a brain stem, in which our evolutionarily anchored instincts slumber? Or a limbic system stirred by emotions and affections?

The analogy is tempting. City and country, after all, periodically ***re***member their past. Usually to confirm their identity. Sometimes this is proclaimed ***urbi et orbi***. Catholic folklore has a nationalistic counterpart in commemoration ceremonies. The people gather each year, as if by instinct and with restrained emotion, around monumental columns, colossal statues of modest torsos to remember its glorious or tragic past. This pseudo-ritualistic repetitive compulsion is also common to the families and friends of traffic accident victims, former concentration camp inmates or Pim Fortuyn followers. They all periodically pause to reflect on the ***raison d'être*** of their post-existence.

In the year of cultural heritage we transgress our instincts and emotions. Cultural heritage revolves primarily on reason, on the national neocortex in which the country's higher forms of consciousness and reflectivity are stored. Like an expansive 'wetware', the Dutch cultural identity defines itself by its 'state of water': in canals, rivers tamed by locks and bridges and polders protected by windmills, dikes and Delta works. In the cities churches, palaces of culture, canal houses, post-industrial ruins and (post) modern architectonic landmarks compliment this national long-term memory.

But where is the seat of our short-term memory? In annual celebrations, like dance parades, summer carnivals and theatre festivals. In these urban festivities a diversity of life styles is shared. This urban culture no longer represents a shared identity, but rather reflects (upon) a world of difference. Urban culture revolves around the mix and the remix.

In our dealings with public space, attention has shifted from identity to difference and from the past to the present. In barely perceptible ways the quality of public space has changed in these shifts, which has been exponentially expanded as well as condensed by new media. SMS-ing and e-mailing, in the virtual city we keep one another continuously up to date on the mobility of our selves (***autos***), of our 'automobility' in the broadest sense. These virtual interactions may seem the most ephemeral element of the urban short-term memory, but they nonetheless make a longer-lasting impression than the analogue phone calls of the past. An SMS message is even more durable than the analogue reminder of the answering machine. Because digital interactions and transactions are traced by the Global Positioning System and stored on servers, they are even a potential part of world history. Certainly in times of terror.

In this regard, the private has long ceased to be the opposite of public. Every virtual private conversation is public property and reproducible. At the same time, there is an increasing privatization of the public space. I am not thinking here of security cameras, urban patrols or private security services. I am speaking of the fragmentation and atomization of public space. Do we prefer to cruise through public space with head phones in the car or walking with a mobile phone at the ready? Has this not imperceptibly transformed public space from a space of sojourn into a transit area? This physically and virtually irresistible automobility has turned us into autonomous capsules, which are nevertheless available for interaction at all times.

What can art still signify in such a space? Is there still room for art *in* public space? Or is it not more appropriate to consider art, in a world in which public space is fast disappearing, precisely as the creation of a resistant public space, varying from Lozano-Hemmer's interactive *Body Movies* projections and Jeanne van Heeswijk's *Vlaardinger Strip* to Martijn Engelbrecht's illegal immigrant questionnaires and Marc Bijl's urban interventions? Perhaps it is time to speak of art *of* public space, or even about art *as* public space. Art as engagement in times of terror that reminds us of what happens *between* people. Simply put: art as *inter*est.

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Tags

Art Discourse, Memory, Public Space, Urban Space

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