

# Tilted Arc Revisited

## How Works of Art Make Their Publics

*Peter Peters, Ruth Benschop*

Essay – September 28, 2012

**On the basis of the Actor Network Theory and Science & Technology Studies (STS), Ruth Benschop and Peter Peters, affiliated with the lectorate Autonomy and Publicness in the Arts at the Zuyd University of Applied Sciences, attempt to reinterpret the meaning of art in public space. Using Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* as a case in point, they take a different approach than that of the usual dualist thinking on art and its publics.**

No one crossing Federal Plaza in New York in the mid-1980s could possibly miss it. A slightly bent curve of hard rusting steel was blocking the way of those who traversed the open space of the plaza. As a large metal object in public space, Richard Serra's work *Tilted Arc*, installed in 1981, was an intervention in the daily routines of city dwellers who were forced to deviate from their course. They were not amused. As the tension surrounding the work of art rose to unseen heights, it was eventually removed from Federal Plaza in 1989. The dismantling of the sculpture came as a result of a trial between the General Services Administration, the commissioners of the work and Serra himself. While the GSA considered that it had the right to remove the work, Serra defended the point that removing the work also implied destroying it, as it was designed and conceived for that particular location.<sup>1</sup> As a site-specific work, he argued, it could not exist independently from its physical environment.

Despite its removal as a physical object, Serra's *Tilted Arc* lives on in the debate on the role of art in public space. As a work of art it embodied one of the core constituent elements of modern art, namely aesthetic autonomy, yet outside the confines of the modern art museum. On a plaza in downtown Manhattan, the tilted arc of rusted steel turned out to be a complex and manifold thing. Miwon Kwon has outlined that the site-specificity of an art work can be defined on three levels. As a material object it exists at a specific place (Federal Plaza). Secondly, it is also the product of site-specific institutional locales (municipal policies on urban art). Finally, Kwon argues, a work like *Tilted Arc* is anchored or located in specific discourses: 'The site is now structured (inter)textually rather than spatially, and its model is not a map but an itinerary, a fragmentary sequence of actions and events through spaces, that is, a nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist.'<sup>2</sup>

In this article, we will argue that the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) offers valuable strategies to trace these multiple ontologies of works of art in public space. Central to our argument is the notion of 'matters of concern'.<sup>3</sup> Rather than staying within the representational register that characterizes much dualist thinking on art and its publics, we will argue in a performative register that focuses on the 'work of art' as an ongoing endeavour of assembling agencies, rather than constructing a finished work that can be (re)presented in a more or less unproblematic way.

## Scientific Matters of Fact

STS is an interdisciplinary field of research that emerged as a response to problems in the philosophy and sociology of science in the 1960s and 1970s. Philosophers of science tended to focus on the normative discussion of scientific results, while sociologists of science drew attention to social factors at work in scientific practice. Neither saw the other as particularly relevant. STS underwrote the normative intent of philosophy of science, but argued that to productively do so, more attention should be paid to, in a famous phrase of Bruno Latour, science-in-the-making. This should be studied, however, not by focusing only on the social aspects of scientific practice, but by following all the work involved in producing scientific matters of fact. By doing so, scientific results appear not as either correct or false representations of nature, as facts or mistakes, but as an intrinsic and understandable part of science-in-the-making. The advantage of this symmetrical approach is that it allows us to study science without already having to side with those whom history has shown to be the 'winners' or 'losers', those scientists who we, with hindsight, take to be right or those we take to have been mistaken. For it is only such hindsight, STS argues, that allows us to do make such categorizations. If we want to understand science, we should refrain from such a priori taking of sides, for in the process of finding out what is true and what is not, scientists themselves do not yet know. And processes can be traced only by ignoring our current normative ideas about scientific outcomes and by focusing on all the work done to create matters of fact.

Besides problematizing the difference between the context of discovery and that of justification (Popper), and asking STS researchers to focus on all work and to refrain from focusing only on what we take to be social work and from taking sides when they study scientific practice, STS also problematizes the opposition of fundamental scientific knowledge and its application in the real world. When you study the work done to create matters of fact, STS argues, what you see is that in order to become true, the world in which these facts become true has to be adjusted to them. A famous example of this line of argument is Latour's analysis of Pasteur's discovery of penicillin in his book *The Pasteurization of France* (1988).<sup>4</sup> Against common wisdom, Latour argues that facts are not true irrespective of where they are. On the contrary, they can only become true in worlds constructed precisely to reveal their truth. Penicillin could only become a proper and effective cure because besides organizing the laboratory in which Pasteur worked in such a way that it could reveal its properties, the world of farmers and cows was made to resemble that laboratory to such an extent that penicillin 'worked' there too. To put it differently: facts are like trains. They cannot move through the world without the infrastructure of railways, tickets, stations, conductors, etcetera. Looking at science-in-the-making thus involves not only ignoring the outcome of all the work, ignoring differences between social and non-social factors playing a role, but also ignoring the seemingly self-evident boundaries scientists erect to differentiate their scientific work from the rest of the world.

## Chains of Transformation

In our description of STS, we are focusing in particular on the research tradition called Actor Network Theory. <sup>5</sup> The central idea behind ANT, one that we implicitly have been using in the above, is its focus on relationality. This relational approach has been developed in countless case studies and theoretical contributions in very different domains, from medicine, law, economics, science history and political theory to human geography. To describe and understand a phenomenon or the workings of an artefact, we have to study how it can be related to a range of entities, human and non-human, material and discursive. 'We don't know yet how all those actors are connected but we can state as the new default position before the study starts that all the actors we are going to deploy might be *associated* in such a way that they *make others do things*.' <sup>6</sup> Thus, no a priori empirical or conceptual categories that can be taken as explanations. That which is taken as a stable explanation can itself be explained from its place in the various webs of agency. What actor network researchers are interested in is: 'To designate this thing which is neither one actor among many nor a force behind all actors transported through some of them but a connection that transports, so to speak, transformations, we use the word translation. . . . So the word 'translation' now takes on a somewhat specialized meaning: relation that does not transport causality but induces two mediators into coexisting.'<sup>7</sup>

To get a more concrete grasp on what this means, let us briefly consider an article in which Latour takes the reader along to the Amazonian jungle of Roraima to follow 'in the wild' the way in which scientific certainty is created. <sup>8</sup> Rhetorically, Latour suggests that he is there to trap the moment that science manages to bridge the gap between reality and fact, between the world that is there and the scientist's confident rendering of it. He observed geomorphologists and pedologists in their research practices. The scientists researching the Amazonian soil have selected their samples, which they detach, separate, preserve and classify. From plants the samples have turned into abstractions that have become scientific referents. The scientific text differs from other narrative forms for it mobilizes its own internal referent and therefore carries in itself its own verification. <sup>9</sup> Acts of reference do not rely on resemblance with the reality the samples were extracted from, they rely on a regulated series of transformations, transmutations and translations. Reference, according to Latour, 'is our way of keeping something constant through a series of transformations': <sup>10</sup> 'Phenomena are what circulates all along through the reversible chain of transformations, at each step losing some properties to gain others that render them compatible with already established centers of calculation.'<sup>11</sup> In describing these chains of transformation, Latour makes two arguments. First, although it seems he is far away from scientific institutions and practices, the way in which the situation is assembled in the forest already bears scientific marks. The forest is not pristine, or rather the situation he finds himself in – soil, instruments, people, questions, footnotes, paper, texts – can only be understood by referring both to nature and to scientific culture. Second, as soon as the scientists present at the scene start to work, two things happen. Their acts *reduce* the situation they find themselves in: they do not take home the forest, but a particularly framed residue of the forest. And through that reduction, they *perpetuate* the forest: the framed residue of the forest that they take home will allow them later to speak confidently about the forest, to take it up in research and publications. What Latour shows in this paper is how this movement of translation is fundamental for the *whole* scientific process. Every step along the way is one of translation, and also, and this is crucial for our argument here, the last step of making the research public: publication.

To summarize, using an ANT approach to study a given practice means turning a blind eye to common knowledge and the self-understanding of science, and instead becoming a meticulous follower of the relationality of practice, of what is actually done. Doing so allows us to see the translations that allow categories, definitions and things to appear.

## Tracing the Work of Art

Having originated from and elaborated through the study of science, can we simply apply STS to the study of artistic practice and the question of how works of art 'make' their public? And if we decide we can, what do we need to take into consideration when doing so? First of all, our rough introduction of STS sketches a research tradition that has long since extended and branched out. Although it still employs the principles noted above, in response to both requests for its application in new domains as well as to academic critique on several positions and consequences of the STS approach, it now includes studies that are more readily normative, more interested in processes of attuning and attachment than construction, and, most relevant to our argument here, focused on different fields than science.

From the onset, STS has not focused only on science. Following its own principles, this makes sense. If ignoring the definitions, boundaries and differentiations science itself uses to produce matters of fact is what an STS approach entails, there is no guessing where you might end up. Following what is done in practice can take you far afield. More prosaically, STS researchers have studied various boundary crossings between science and other neighbouring disciplines as well as studying different aspects of artistic practice.

<sup>12</sup> In such studies of artistic practice, a similar approach is taken to that of science. Like the departure from science's self-understandings, ANT opposes itself to modern art's focus on notions such as originality, autonomy and creativity as relevant causal explanations. In a recent polemic article, Bruno Latour attacked the notion of the 'original' in art. Great art is not a point of origin, he argues, but a trajectory that can be compared to a river: 'A given work of art should be compared not to any isolated locus but to a river's catchment, complete with its estuaries, its tributaries, its dramatic rapids, its many meanders and of course also with several hidden sources. . . . To give a name to this catchment area, we will use the word "trajectory". A work of art – no matter of which material it is made – has a trajectory.'<sup>13</sup>

This way of framing the work of art, in its double connotation as an object and an activity, underlines the fundamental performative nature of any art work. In order to be, art has to be done. Following Latour's line of argument, there would not be an a priori distinction between scientific facts and works of art. Both come into existence only through the kind of work that he has described for the Amazonian soil as well as for Hans Holbein's 1533 painting *The Ambassadors* in the National Gallery in London.<sup>14</sup> In both cases, the starting point is not the dualism between words and world, the original and the facsimile, but the fascinating trajectories that are created through the work of science or art.

Whereas the notion of the trajectory of 'matters of fact' is reminiscent of STS moves on science, Latour has developed the notion of 'matters of concern' largely in the study of both politics and the arts.<sup>15</sup> Underlying the idea of 'matters of concern' is a critique of the realist idea that facts are simply there. Instead, we should see them as agencies 'with their mode of fabrication and their stabilizing mechanisms clearly visible'.<sup>16</sup> Considering the connotation of performativity in his rendering of 'matters of concern', it is no surprise that Latour mobilizes the metaphor of the theatre: 'A matter of concern is what happens to a matter of fact when you add to it its whole scenography, much like you would do by shifting your attention from the stage to the whole machinery of a theatre. . . . Instead of simply being there, matters of fact begin to look different, to render a different sound, they start to move in all directions, they overflow their boundaries, they include a complete set of new actors, they reveal the fragile envelopes in which they are housed. Instead of 'being there whether you like it or not' they still have to be, yes (this is one of the huge differences), they have to be liked, appreciated, tasted, experimented upon, prepared, put to the test.'<sup>17</sup>

The notion of 'matters of concern', in another register, is reminiscent of related work on

'good experiments' (based on work by philosopher Isabelle Stengers and by Vinciane Despret).<sup>18</sup> Good experiments are those that are able to develop enough relevant interest in a phenomenon to allow it to express itself in an interesting/novel way. Rather than stepping back from the phenomenon, experimental research is here characterized by the construction of intense and forceful, yet at once sensitive and interested conditions for surprising insights to emerge. The image of the stage and the machinery of a theatre resonates in the distinction that Latour makes between matters of concern not as objects but things, or as he phrases it, as 'gatherings'<sup>19</sup> or '[a] controversial *affair*, a *cause*, yes a *res*'.<sup>20</sup>

### Federal Plaza Revisited

Let's return to Serra's *Tilted Arc* at Federal Plaza. As we have seen in the introduction, it stirred a controversy that finally led to the dismantling of a work of art, a rather dramatic course of events. In ANT-terms we could say that the artist and the commissioning institutional body have not been able to create the kind of stable actor network that would make it possible for the tilted arc to exist over a long period of time as a public work of art. The steel sculpture was an intervention in already present actor networks and as such caused a series of transformations. Federal Plaza turned out to have conflicting agencies. As a space of urban mobility, it was supposed to give way to impatient pedestrians. After a tilted arc of steel had been erected on the Plaza, a different agency was assumed, namely that of a modern art space. Thus, the Plaza became part of the machinery that was necessary to turn the steel sculpture into the art work *Tilted Arc*. As a 'matter of concern', Serra's work of art can be considered as a gathering that involved many actors to exist. It literally became a controversial affair, a *res*. We can even go a step further. The actual dismantling of the tilted arc on Federal Plaza has not meant the end of it as a work of art. The end of its material life at a specific locus has not ended the sequence of discursive performances that Latour would call its 'trajectory'.

Speaking about *Tilted Arc* in terms of 'matters of concern' enables us to move beyond the dualism of an art work and its publics. We can think of the act of making public works of art as part of the gathering of agencies. The story of *Tilted Arc* makes us aware of the non-linear, relational and heterogeneous character of this gathering. There is no privileged point of view, nor are there hegemonic categories such as 'public', 'autonomy' or even 'modern art' to map and navigate these assemblages.

As it is, the creation of a public work of art actively invites the attachment of new agencies, thus enriching the situation. This situation *is* not only a part of the work of art, it *does* part of the work of art. In fact, it is precisely through this work that it can be said to characterize the existence of the 'art work' as the 'work of art', which is not just a descriptive, but also a normative insight. As Latour phrases it: 'The more *attachments* it has, the more it exists. And the more mediators there are the better.'<sup>21</sup> Good public art, in this view, as a matter of concern assembles more mediators and thus reinforces its existence, not just as an object of knowledge or a source of aesthetic experience, but as a trajectory of performances and translations through which things are making publics.

**Peter Peters** is Chair of the Lectorate Autonomy and Publicness in the Arts at the Zuyd University of Applied Arts and a university lecturer at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Maastricht University.

**Ruth Benschop** is a senior researcher in the Lectorate Autonomy and Publicness in the Arts at the Zuyd University of Applied Sciences, where she investigates the relation between ethnography, styles of documentation and art, and undertakes artistic research.

## Footnotes

1. Richard Serra, 'Art and Censorship', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 17 (1991) no. 3, 574-581.
2. Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 176, quoted in: Jason Gaiger, 'Dismantling the Frame: Site-Specific Art and Aesthetic Autonomy', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 49 (2009) no. 1, 50.
3. Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 30 (2004) no. 2, 225-248; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
4. Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
5. Actor Network Theory is associated in particular with Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law. For an introduction to ANT, see Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, op. cit. (note 3). Approaches 'after' ANT focus particularly on notions of subjectivity and on political questions, see for instance the work of E. Gomart, 'Methadone: Six Effects in Search of a Substance', *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 32 (2002) no. 1, 93-135 and Noortje Marres, 'The Issues Deserve More Credit: Pragmatist Contributions to the Study of Public Involvement in Controversy', *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 37 (2007) no. 5, 759-780.
6. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, op. cit. (note 3), 107.
7. Ibid., 108.
8. Bruno Latour, 'Circulating Reference: Sampling the Soil in the Amazon Forest', in: *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
9. Ibid., 56.
10. Ibid., 58.
11. Ibid., 72.
12. For research on boundary crossing that is relevant here, see for instance, S.L. Star and J.R. Griesemer 'Institutional Ecology, 'Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-1939', *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 19 (1989) no. 3, 387-420; and Peter Galison, *How Experiments End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). For examples of STS research of the arts, see Emilie Gomart and Antoine Hennion, 'A Sociology of Attachment: Music Amateurs, Drug Users', in: John Law and John Hassard (eds.), *Actor Network Theory and After* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 220-248; Vivian van Saaze, *Doing Artworks: A Study into the Presentation and Conservation of Installation Artworks*, PhD thesis, Maastricht University/Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (2009); and Albea Yaneva, 'When a Bus Met a Museum: Following Artists, Curators and Workers in an Installation', *Museum and Society*, vol. 1 (2003) no. 3, 116-131.
13. Bruno Latour, 'The Migration of the Aura, or How to Explore the Original Through Its Facsimiles' (2008), available online at [www.bruno-latour.fr](http://www.bruno-latour.fr) (accessed 11 October 2011).
14. Ibid.
15. Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?', op. cit. (note 3), 225-248 and Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, op. cit. (note 3).
16. Ibid., 120.
17. Bruno Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern? Two Lectures in Empirical Philosophy* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2008), 39.
18. Vinciane Despret, 'The Body We Care For: Figures of Anthopo-Zoo-Genesis', *Body & Society*, vol. 10 (2004) no. 2-3, 111-134 and idem, "Sheep Do Have Opinions", in: Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Karlsruhe/Cambridge, MA: ZKM/Center for Art and Media, MIT Press, 2005), 360-369.
19. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, op. cit. (note 3).
20. Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, op. cit. (note 17), italics in original.
21. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, op. cit. (note 3), 217.

## Tags

Art Discourse, Philosophy, Public Space

This text was downloaded on April 2, 2025 from  
*Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain*  
[onlineopen.org/tilted-arc-revisited](https://onlineopen.org/tilted-arc-revisited)