PDF

2003

Space in Public Art

Xander Karskens

Utter the three words *art* and *public space* in one sentence, and you can be sure that the person you are talking to will make a strained expression. From this reaction, you can conclude that it is a sensitive topic: in recent years, a great deal of discussion has gone on about art in public spaces. Generally speaking, this discussion has two sides: on the one hand, it is about the autonomy of art itself (and its difficult relationship with the masses), on the other, it concerns the form in which art could potentially present itself in the public space (and how its implementation in the public space should be regulated).

Visual art can make an important contribution toward improving the quality of our public spaces, but it can get into difficulties when it is expected to play a more practical, and thus less autonomous, role. It would seem that these two worlds are difficult to reconcile, by virtue of their inherent differences in character. The pictorial arts have, since the advent of modernism, felt quite comfortable within the neutral white walls of their institutional locus, where they could be displayed free from any external influences – and where they were protected from distractions of a more worldly nature. The public came to these works and was given the opportunity to behold them in an appropriate manner and at their leisure. Only by going to them was it possible to unravel their various levels of meaning and mystical secrets – to be enchanted, shocked, moved or brought into confusion. And art had no need to get involved with the masses, and did not need to address anyone but its most loyal followers, a group which, in addition, was well-informed about art's history. And as for the masses – art is quite simply not meant for everyone. But *everyone* is precisely the target group of art in the public space. To put it succinctly: art will just have to behave differently in order to communicate, in order to be understood in surroundings in which it must compete with a deluge of other visual information. The most sensitive issue, then, regarding the use of visual art in public spaces involves the infringement of its autonomy, which could mean robbing it of its power: there are enough examples of works which seem merely to function as decorations for new buildings – as icing on the cake. Increasingly often, art appears to be routinely deployed as a planological adhesive in urban architectural designs, as a way to give public spaces a more human face. A cynic could say that the artist is metamorphosing into an official from the Department of Beautification and that his/her only task is to provide solutions of a purely practical nature for filling gaps in the design of the public space.

In his lecture *Misuse of public space* written for a seminar on the *über*-Vinex-location Leidsche Rijn, Chris Dercon included critical remarks about the consensus model held in such high esteem in the Netherlands and employed widely by experts, advisory committees and in connection with the awarding of commissions to artists – a model which has institutionalised the relationship between art and the public space in a stifling manner and increasingly often transforms art into a 'communication strategy.' [1] Dercon poses the question whether the artist does not actually feel out of place in this situation and argues for a thorough re-evaluation of the artists role as problem solver. Rather than asking the question, ''How should art be involved at the new location?,' one would be well-advised more often to think about the reasons for art use in public space.[2] Its long

unquestioned status has begun to be challenged as a result of changes in the character and planning of public spaces and there is now a great need for new formulations and alternative models. How relevant are artists' insights as regards planological issues? How should we deal with the subjectivity which forms an inherent part of the quality of one's 'living environment'? How should commissions come into being – is not the committee and expert model in many cases a recipe for lame compromises?

It would seem advisable to distinguish clearly between all the different positions taken within the vast repository which 'art in public space' has become. The term only came into common use following World War II – but within a span of fifty years it went from meaning a statue on a bridge to radio transmitters broadcasting angelic choral music to multicultural sport tournaments. All under the same common denominator, 'art in public space,' but hardly comparable with one another as regards objective, form or function. Different sorts of public space require different sorts of art, not to mention the fact that not all of them lend themselves to art at all, and it is hard to compare a sculpture that has been commissioned with a temporary group exhibition of outdoor projects, or with the wave of socially committed project art from the last ten years – a movement for which seeking public attention is a top priority.

In one last great attempt to address the yawning gap between it and society, to throw off the yoke of embittered 1980s cynicism and to return to a position within the context of everyday life, in the 1990s visual art increasingly often presented itself to its public in a personal manner. The new engagement of 'social sculpture' (or the wider discourse of Nicolas Bourriaud's 'relational aesthetics') ensured, among other things, that the position of the viewer shifted toward that of 'participant,' that the process became more important than the end-product and that elitism made place for generosity. Through direct personal contact, art reconquered its legitimacy with the public; it massaged sore feet and stiff limbs, came at night to watch over one's dreams, made friends for life and sincerely promised never to be arrogant again. Forced by necessity, it thus broke loose from its accustomed institutional locus, the museum ('mausoleum') or art gallery, and (partially – and more or less automatically) switched its place of work to the public space, which, after all, is where real life always takes place. If one pursues this line of reasoning, one can conclude that this embracing of the public space was a logical stage in a development whose origins can be found in art itself, i.e., not just in political circles. Although they are often found included under one common denominator, this is, in short, a different type of public art than that created on commission. It is a motion from inside toward outside, a necessary gesture from a sector in crisis (due to excessive cynicism and aloofness), a sector which realises that its public's patience is up and which sees its position of highest authority in the field of fantasy production being eroded to the advantage of other, more accessible sectors of contemporary culture.

The Dutch contribution to the 2003 Venice Biennale ('We Are The World') can be regarded as a high-point (and, in view of recent developments toward a more politically connoted approach, perhaps even an end-point) in this niche of current art. It displayed a representative cross-section of the participatory, relational, generous camp: all five artists situate their projects emphatically square in the middle of society, infiltrate everyday life and influence the lives of those involved in a direct, personal manner. And yet, as viewer, one cannot help feeling that something is out of kilter. A bar as a work of art is a fine idea, and perhaps contains a selection of metaphorical qualities, but if it is out of order for most of the time, it does not make a very positive impression. And are there really people who will *seriously* play a spot of *landjepik* (a Dutch game) if there is nothing better to do? The problem with all these works is that they still are *works of art* – in principle not different from their counterparts in the real world, but all the same, works of art. It is *not* the real world, but a view or interpretation of it; it asks to be *experienced* , spontaneously and without reflection, but *is* ultimately interpreted by the viewer. Art is not everyday life (fortunately!); a presentation within the institutional context of the Biennale actually makes such a characterisation a contradiction in terms.

If we refer to the public space, we are actually always referring to our urban environment and its periphery. This space, which affects the daily lives of a large number of people, has undergone significant change in recent

decades: the intricate dynamic of urban processes and the growing omnipresence of visual information has come increasingly to dictate our need for specific, appropriately adapted contributions by artists. Developments in planological insights and the heterogeneity of views as concerning the 'ideal city' and what it should contain guarantee a lack of clarity for the task which falls to visual art. Should it give us something we can hold on to, or should it in fact undermine our feeling of security? Should it give us sign posts, navigate, provide information and insight into designing our living environment? To what extent should it get involved in architectural and urban planning? Are artists the right persons to actively team up with architects and urban planners in the early stages of their deliberations, or is it, in fact, their role to clarify and supplement the ideas of architects and urban planners?

An analysis of the present situation of the visual arts in the Netherlands could lead one to conclude that essentially two camps have emerged on the scene: one favours a return to artistic autonomy, the other a further fusing with such (low) cultural areas as fashion, design and advertising, and music. The current discussion concerning the future of Dutch museums and how they can best play a meaningful role (assuming this is still possible!) within our fragmented culture of video clips, bombardment by advertising and overall entertainment, is to an extent kept going by these two conflicting standpoints. And, as well, when thinking about the contribution of art to the public space, it is impossible to ignore the question whether art is at all able to hold its ground, in view of the far-reaching process of coding which the urban context is undergoing. Even the landscape has become a consumer product: 'experience culture' is now the Netherlands' most public domain.

One of the most concrete structural elements of this experience culture in the cities is the outer wall – the skin, the armour between private and public space. In his article, 'How can we hack the public space?' Siebe Thissen sketches the situation in today's metropolis, in which, in the view of the author, it is necessary to develop a new technique enabling one to read the city in the middle of all its proliferating of information and information carriers.[3] In respect of all these visual offerings, a distinction is to be made between zones in which the local authorities have strict rules (in chic shopping streets, figurative use of the outer wall is discouraged and the street kept uncluttered and interpretable) and zones where no regulation takes place or where it is not possible through regulation to get a grip on the polymorphous illegal infiltration of the public space. Our perception of this information contributes significantly to our feel for relationships in the world in which we live: by means of it, we make distinctions between, e.g., feelings of security, well-being and structure on the one hand, and discontentment and instability on the other. Naturally, our daily (unconscious) interpretation of our living environment is one of the departure points of the designers of our public spaces, but is by the same token obviously also a fertile starting point for artistic strategies of a more antagonistic nature. The outer wall's democratic character as a communicator of messages has made it possible for poster and sticker affixers, graffiti-artists and other exponents of street culture to find a domain within which they can directly influence people's perceptions of the urban environment. By means of additions or changes to existing urban codes (advertising, signposting, street furniture) these urban guerrillas undermine existing meanings and unitary interpretations of everyday phenomena. The effectivity of their playful artistic strategies of semantic confusion is connected to their unmanageability: they are an intrinsic component of the public space, in part motivated by dissatisfaction about the dominance of capitalistic codes and the politics of regulation. By operating at the same level as the signifiers which inspire them, by posing as equals taking part in the same game, these street infiltrators effectively complicate the task of reading our everyday environment and force us, consciously or unconsciously, to re-evaluate what we think we know.[4]

The spontaneous, organic, direct character of such statements does not lend itself to visual art specifically commissioned for public space. Naturally, there are autonomous artists who can successfully penetrate this domain and position their work in a comparable manner in the urban landscape – typically with the help of the same instrumentarium as the graffiti and sticker artists. If art is to hold its ground in the public domain and make its mark, it must be able to transform itself sufficiently, and to integrate itself into everyday life until (almost) beyond recognisability – but without forfeiting excitement and artistic fantasy. A work of art or project which

disguises itself in this way (ha! – art), can, in the public space, be lecturing and dull in character; often the artist expects that passers-by will briefly assume an appropriate position and, as good viewers, quickly interpret his intentions. The to a degree uncontrollable big-city dynamic demands flexible artistic input, contributions which will be able to adapt to the speed, the chaos and the spectacle of the street – works which can pose as a part of everyday life and casually reveal themselves to the passer-by (not: viewer). Art which unexpectedly appears, amazes, disturbs and throws up questions; art which deludes, stimulates and possesses the illusion of motion.

The public space is, after all, interesting because of its unpredictability and uncontrollability – this is where its promise of freedom is to be found, room for creativity, adventure and potential beauty. The same concept forms the basis of virtually all artistic strategies in the history of modern art which concerned themselves with giving content to the urban environment, from the historic avant-gardes at the beginning of the 20th century, through Constant's utopian *New Babylon* all the way to today's post-modern situation. The public space must also continue to be and offer *space*; the more it is filled, enlarged and framed, the less play is left over.

In the autumn of 2003, during a discussion evening organised by the Lectoraat Art and Public Space concerning the future of art with a character of social engagement (out of the museum, into the real world), a number of artists commented on the present situation in respect of their own professional activities. Suchan Kinoshita, De Geuzen and Otto Berchem are all involved with direct communication with the public and strive to formulate alternative standpoints vis à vis the object-based museum art of the post-modern generation which preceded them. While the artists? comments reflected a shared interest in direct communication with the viewer, their opinions on the form and function of art in public spaces diverged widely.

Kinoshita's preference of the public space as a locus for her projects is connected to the public space's uncontrollability and unpredictability – qualities conducive to her artistic process, ones which can only lose strength when placed in a theoretical frame. In her view, the movement outwards (as well as the investigation of institutional limitations) is a logical step for art, and according to her, we should be careful when applying such categories as 'social sculpture' or 'art in public space,' as this leads to contextual criteria of judgement which overlook what art itself can mean: a subjective experience, in which the unnameable plays an important role. Berchem, whose projects continue to be the ones most consistently placed under the umbrella of 'social sculpture,' was also at pains to underscore reaching the public *outside* the context of art, and placed the greatest emphasis on furthering the sense of communality – i.e., both the bringing together of like-minded people, and the creation of new social microstructures. The ideal of the artist trio, De Geuzen, a foundation for 'multivisual research,' is more anchored in the area of commissioned work. In a certain sense, they are, as compared to Kinoshita and Berchem, further removed from the status of autonomous artist and are more often involved with result-directed research at the local governmental level into issues concerning landscape planning and urban planning.

In the course of the evening, it became increasingly clear that the received impression that artists have a collective interest in the public domain is in many respects an illusory one. In reality, there is a great difference between art which is based on autonomous principles and is directed toward social structures, and art devoted almost exclusively to instrumental applications. This difference is an impediment to a coherent discussion – a discussion which, in the coming years, is sure to be carried on more intensively than ever before.

Notes:

1. Chris Dercon, 'Misbruik van de openbare ruimte', Archis, no. 5, 2001, p. 31.
2. ibid., p. 31.
3. Siebe Thissen, 'Hoe hacken wij de openbare ruimte?', Metropolis M, no. 5, 2003, p. 103.
4. Thissen asserts correctly that the forms employed, e.g., stickers, posters and graffiti, have now been co-opted by marketing bureaus and are used in ad campaigns for such multinationals as Nike. In this sense, this anti-culture, too, is undergoing institutionalisation.

Related posts:

1. [Ruimte in de openbare kunst](#)