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# Highrise and Common Ground

Jeroen Boomgaard

The Zuidas is not alone. The relatively narrow strip of land south of Amsterdam intended to house a bustling urban centre by 2030 has numerous counterparts. Throughout Europe, conglomerations are being built that plainly express, by means of large-scale projects, an ambition to convert stagnation into movement and breathe new life into somnolent cities. It is no secret that this impulse is primarily economic. Properly channelled flows of capital will lead the right people to the desired location, but this influx of cash can only be initiated if the new domain exudes quality. This makes the design of the area a concern of the utmost importance. Experience has shown that a business district alone is not enough. Wealthy visitors/residents/entrepreneurs want more: they want high-quality entertainment and leisure facilities, and therefore culture is often high on the developers' agenda. What counts as culture in these cases is not always clear, but at the very least, a podium should be created where flexible expats, captains of industry and members of the creative class can meet unhindered, in order that the machinery of growth may spin even faster.

The Zuidas will be unique – that is what the plans repeatedly emphasize. The exceptional nature of the project, however, also serves to proclaim an exceptional situation, a state of emergency in which normal procedures and decision-making processes are replaced by opaque and fragile coalitions of government and market parties. And as with other states of emergency, its proclamation is accompanied by a certain level of aggression. Anyone who doubts its necessity doesn't get it; anyone who resists it has missed the boat forever. Yet this rhetoric of exception is in danger of being defeated by a lack of support. The stakes are too great, the parties they represent too small. The sky-high ambitions are unstable; they are not securely grounded.<sup>1</sup>

Exception is often a condition for creating good art. Works of art are not the product of the time-consuming consultation structures that typify democracy, but of the determined effort of the passionate loner. Suspending the rules, as is being done at the Zuidas, therefore seems the ideal condition for creating an environment in which the visual arts can fully function. The appointment of a separate visual art supervisor and the establishment of the Virtual Museum Zuidas showed that everyone was cognizant of the opportunities presented here. The ambitions that had developed in terms of art in the last several years were in fact almost as high as the ambitions for the area as a whole, but the implementation of the projects has run into frequent obstacles.<sup>2</sup> This troublesome state of affairs, incidentally, is not limited to art. It is a logical consequence of the mistrust that marks all negotiations. The huge investments on the one hand and the vagueness of the procedure to be followed, the lack of clear rules, on the other has resulted in stagnations that are at odds with the decisiveness suggested by the bottom-up ideology of the development of areas like the Zuidas. Art that is supposed to participate in the construction of the city cannot avoid the squabbles associated with the construction of exceptional projects. For art, however, this mistrust is particularly detrimental. The return on investment that exceptional art can deliver cannot be calculated. Investing in it cannot, therefore, be the subject of a negotiations process; it must be based on the willingness to provide room for the unexpected and the unknown. To achieve

interesting art in the area, it is necessary to make an exception to the exception. Only when the role of art in the public domain of the Zuidas is defined in such a way that its unique character is clear and accepted by all parties can the sky-high ambition that pervades the plans be made reality.

### Domain

On the Mahlerplein at the Zuidas, at one of the entrances to the main offices of ABN-Amro, sits a bronze puppy made by Tom Claassen. At first glance it is unclear what it is doing there. In so carefully designed an area, this statue must surely be part of a well-considered plan. The Virtual Museum Zuidas, however, has had no hand in it. The statue is a literal and figurative watchdog for the bank. It signals that this portion of the plaza is private property and that the bank decides what to do with it. And in this the puppy demonstrates precisely the specific character of public space at the Zuidas.

The privatization of public space seems an irreversible process. And the public space of the Zuidas, where design as well as management and security must meet the demands of investors, can surely not escape this trend.<sup>3</sup> It remains to be seen, however, what consequences this privatization has for public space and for the role that works of art play in it. The bronze watchdog has been erected as proof of the occupation of a place by a private enterprise, but in this the artwork is no different from much of the art erected by the government in public space. The diverse objects of stone or metal that have popped up across the Netherlands in the past few decades, at spots that apparently needed emphasis or beautification for one reason or another, are more than innocent or superfluous decoration. The placement of a work of art 'defines' a spot that was hitherto nondescript, an undefined area, which only then becomes genuinely 'public'. In this the word 'public' implies the opposite of what it suggests. An undefined, openly accessible place, when explicitly labelled public domain, is taken out of its undefined state and absorbed within the domain of authority. The predominant characteristic of this strategy is, in the words of Michel de Certeau, a victory of place over time. An area is withdrawn from a process of chance and occupied forever.<sup>4</sup> The artwork ultimately serves as the flag that signals this occupation, and that artwork is there to stay.

The master plan drawn up by the initial supervisor, Pi de Bruijn, was predicated on an urban public space in which the streets and plazas between the iconic buildings would form an empty stage for the convergence of capital and creativity. The undefined quality of the public domain on this site demonstrates an optimism about the safe and monocultural meeting zone that would be created. Experience has shown, however, that this open space is primarily a meeting place for conflicting interests. What has been built up to now mainly represents the private interest. In addition to the bank's puppy logo, a museum display of sculptures from the collections of the corporations located in the area has been set up. By contrast, the creation of works that are supposed to represent an indescribable public interest and that should underscore the exceptional character of the area through their exceptional qualities has repeatedly run into insurmountable obstacles. The designs commissioned by the Virtual Museum Zuidas for the Gershwinplein, for example, have been rejected time and time again because the various participating parties feel that the work should satisfy the tastes of the group each represents. Art, therefore, is not only demonstrating the ongoing and acute privatization of the public space by its presence, but also, by its absence, the lack of a guiding government and therefore of a public domain, that is to say a place established by the government, claimed in the name of the public interest. What seems to be emerging is an area in which only the emptiness of corporate culture reigns and in which art that seeks to develop the specific quality of the place is actually not welcome.<sup>5</sup>

### Identity

The fragmentation of interests the Zuidas is in danger of exuding demands a solution, because even administrators and investors know that only an area that manages to suggest more than business and capital is genuinely viable. The appointment of a new supervisor, in the person of Belgian architect bOb Van Reeth, can thus be seen as an attempt to break the impasse. Van Reeth has chosen a radically different approach. He is trying to replace the fragmentary character of the place with a coherent image with a clear identity. The

emphasis on design must be jettisoned in favour of sustainability, and the disparate public space must be fused together into a simple and clear concept that visually connects to Amsterdam's historic city centre. His objective is to create a genuine public space, where a democratic exchange of ideas can take place.<sup>6</sup>

However well-intentioned this principle of Van Reeth's may be, it does raise certain objections. He seems to forget that the public space he is creating is to be commissioned by the recently established NV Zuidas and that its democratic quotient will probably still be a reflection of how the project's development has unfolded. The image of coherence that Van Reeth wants to apply to the public domain thus seems more intended to get developers and investors on the same page so that the process can be implemented faster. The openness and the room to experiment that should be the hallmarks of a free exchange of ideas seems to be more advised against than encouraged. One indication of this is Van Reeth's rejection of Jennifer Tee's most recent design for an artwork for the Gershwinplein. This rejection is based on the fact that Tee's plan is supposedly too self-contained and would not succeed in ensuring the desired unity in the area. Van Reeth seems to have a predilection for a cohesive public space to which an artwork can ultimately be added as a finishing touch. In the process, however, he is repeating on a large scale what ABN-Amro has done on a small scale. The identity that Van Reeth wants to create is a corporate identity, and it is more about recognizability than confrontation. Van Reeth is not alone in his quest for a clear identity. The disintegration of the consensus society of the Netherlands is leading to a nostalgic longing for unity and a sense of belonging, and a great deal of policy is aimed at reinforcing, if not creating, specific identities. Much is now expected of art in this production of identity.<sup>7</sup> This represents a radical shift in the role of art in public space. As outlined above, art used to demarcate a place in the public domain, usually in the name of an institution of authority that sought to establish itself there. Within this framework, the artwork, depending on the place and on the ideology that was being represented, could be an example of purely individual expression or a fully adapted complement to the architecture, as well as everything in between these two extremes, but the point was always the effect of the work on the surrounding area. If a target audience was mentioned, it was not described in detail and the work usually served mankind in general.<sup>8</sup> Now, however, a work of art in public is expected to serve a particular group, to represent a certain interest. The work of art can no longer focus exclusively on the place; it must also relate to the identity or the outlook of the people who live or work there. This shifts preferences toward art that creates recognizability and affirmation, or that allows for an active, or interactive, form of appropriation. The void left behind by the gradual retrenchment of the government is being filled, at the instigation of this same government, with strategies of identification and parochialization. In other words, artists are expected to do more to satisfy the tastes of a particular target audience, not just to serve the interests of this group, but primarily to create a cohesive identity associated with a particular domain.<sup>9</sup> The new visual quality plan being developed for the Zuidas is in fact not so much aimed at countering the fragmentation of public space under the influence of commercial interests as it is designed to create an identity associated with space that serves, a priori, as a home for a fairly clearly identified group of future residents.

### On its Own

The central question in this book is what position art can adopt under such conditions. Highly divergent angles are examined, but no unequivocal answer is provided. Is it possible, for instance, to have a work of art play an 'agonistic' role in an area like the Zuidas, have it be a disruptive factor that sharply points out the hypocritical and concealing nature of its image of unity and consensus and that stimulates dissent in order to reveal the radical oppositions among different segments of the population? Or should the work of art strenuously avoid such politicization of the public domain and instead, through the opportunity for personal experience, open up a genuinely public area?<sup>10</sup> The answer must lie somewhere between the sharply defined interest of the group and the tolerance inherent in the public interest, between the unbridgeable difference and the fragile tolerance of the other. To find this answer, not only does this book examine various theoretical positions, but also explores the area culturally through the eye of the artist/designer. The identity of the Zuidas, after all, is defined not just by its buildings and public space, but by the images and the stories that are associated with the place. From the beginning, the area has been defined by idealized visions and words of fantasy that attempt to conjure up a

future that contrasts sharply with the somewhat colourless reality attached to the place at the moment. The initial plans for the area, for instance, were accompanied by a rhetoric that can be deemed characteristic of the way in which project developers use branding today to sell a project to those directly involved. The future was painted in comparisons that are almost comical: the Zuidas was supposed to become something akin to the Rive Gauche in Paris, and the Parnassusweg (the street that transects the Zuidas area) would show similarities to the Ramblas in Barcelona.<sup>11</sup>

We can, of course, puncture this imagined future based on an idealized past and reveal it as the collection of slogans it really is. But perhaps we could also take these literally, implement them in a way that was probably not intended. If the Zuidas starts to display the rather dark side of Barcelona's cultural thoroughfare, and if the area starts to resemble the neighbourhood in which the Situationists wandered without ever wanting to do any work, a new piece of city will really have been created. To achieve this, however, the art will have to have an effect, one that is the reverse of the effect on deprived urban areas that is attributed to it. This book provides an advance preview of this de-gentrification by crisscrossing the area with images, cultural interventions, that reveal an entirely different aspect. The projects by Barbara Visser, Orgacom, Logoparc, Paul Toornend/Jelle Post and Renee Kool provide the images that disrupt the developers' dreams. In the process, this book offers not only an analysis of the possibilities and impossibilities for art at the Zuidas, but also a concrete preview of the inappropriate and maladjusted things the area needs in order to wake up.

If we subscribe to Jacques Rancière's philosophy that art is politics in that it makes visible things that remain out of sight within the allocation of space,<sup>12</sup> then art at the Zuidas can thwart the major interests of the small groups that are in charge by showing the individual dream that does not aim to serve any interest at all. Jennifer Tee's design for the Gershwinplein is entitled *Oeverloos Verlangen*, 'boundless desire'. This work, which as previously noted has come under fire in recent planning, fits its setting because it underscores its ostentatious ambitions and at the same time seems to create the meeting place that plays such a significant role in considerations of public space at the Zuidas. But the work goes further: the desire it attests to is boundless. And it is precisely through this unattainability that it creates the utopian dimension the Zuidas so badly lacks. Until now, everything in the area has been attuned to use, adapted to the interests of particular parties; there is no room for the disruptive element, the individual factor. The autonomy that underpins Tee's customized design, however, creates an individualizing moment; it represents an interest that can never be served, an identity that wants to remain undefined, and it claims an area without boundaries. It is works like this that can lend the Zuidas a dose of reality, make it real by making the public interest of individual presence visible. And that is exactly the downgrading that the area needs in order to achieve genuine quality.

Jennifer Tee, in collaboration with Richard Niessen and Joost Vermeulen, *Oeverloos verlangen* 2007, design Gershwinplein (montage)

## Notes

1. The specific character of this kind of project is very clearly explicated in E. Swyngedouw, 'A New Urbanity? The ambiguous politics of large-scale urban development projects in European cities', in Willem Salet and Stan Majoor (eds.), *Amsterdam Zuidas. European Space* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2005), pp. 61-79. The consequences of this state of affairs for the Zuidas are further examined in the present volume in the contributions by Joost Zanneveld, Stan Majoor and BAVO.

2. For the ambitions of the Virtual Museum Zuidas and its setbacks, see the article by Henk de Vroom in this volume.

3. This problem has been thoroughly analyzed from various viewpoints over the last several years. See for example Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp, *In Search of New Public Domain* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2001); Lieven de Cauter, *The Capsular Civilization* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2005); René Boomkens, *Een*

drempelwereid. *Moderne ervaring en stedelijke openbaarheid* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 1998).

4. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Los Angeles/Berkeley/London: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 34-37. De Certeau shows that authority not only withdraws a place from the process of change in order to appropriate it forever, but that a central spot is occupied as well, in panoptic fashion, to keep an eye on the surroundings, while a specific form of knowledge about the place is also applied, one not accessible to others. All of these elements play a role in the placement of a work of art on a site that thereby foils entirely, as public space, under the purview of authority. This also explains why in some instances the placement of a work of art elicits so much aggression among area residents, who recognize that the arrival of the artwork means something is being taken from them.

5. For a further elaboration of this viewpoint, see the articles in this volume by Daniel van der Velden and by Roemer van Toorn, on Paul Toornend and Jelle Post's *Untitled\_Spaces*.

6. Marina de Vries, '5 vragen aan bOb Van Reeth', *Krant* no. 3 (September 2007), published by the Virtual Museum Zuidas.

7. This obsession with identity is also demonstrated by the prevailing predilection for community art among all sorts of national and local administrators. It is the hallmark of a retrenching government that no longer claims an area as public space, but that still wants to keep social processes under control and wants to suggest consensus by means of temporary artworks and events. On this see also J. Boomgaard, *Radical Autonomy*, in this volume.

8. A good example of this is the work of the Arnhem School in the 1970s. The designs for public space of this movement were no longer about individual expression, but about a form of direction or serviceability to the spectator who was posited in the most general of terms. On this, see Camiel van Winkel, *Moderne leegte. Over kunst en openbaarheid* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1999).

9. There was a prelude to this very popular form of community art in the 1970s, when artists' collectives, working with local residents, decorated the crumbling walls of deprived neighbourhoods with cheerful and accessible murals. A comparison between the current boom in community projects that serve to visually appropriate a domain and this prelude has yet to be written, but it is clear that in the 1970s, these collaborative projects applied a much more generalized view of humanity than today's projects aimed at focus groups. In *One Place after Another* (Cambridge (Mass.)/London: The MIT Press, 2002) Miwon Kwon provides an excellent analysis of the shift from place to discourse undergone by art in the public domain. She pays insufficient attention, however, to the fusion of domain and target audience.

10. On these positions, see the articles by Chantal Mouffe and Gerard Drosterij in this volume.

11. Willem Salet, 'The Creation of European Space. An Interview with Kloos de Boer and Pi de Bruijn' in: Salet and Majoor (eds.), *op. cit.* pp. 42-60 (see note 1).

12. 'Politics is the conflict about which things belong in its space and which do not, which subjects take part in it and which do not. Art can only be called political when the space and time it subdivides and the forms it selects to occupy this space and time, overlaps the division of space and time, of subjects and objects, of the private and the public, of possibilities and impossibilities through which the political community defines itself.' Jacques Rancière, 'Die Politik der Kunst und ihre Paradoxien', in: Jacques Rancière, *Die Aufteilung des Sinnlichen*, (Berlin: b-books Verlag, 2006), p. 77.

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