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The Myth of Public Domain and Its Demise Along the N16

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There is a myth called public space. It is relatively recent. It tells of a spot, an area, or if you like, a domain that is accessible to everyone, that cannot be claimed – at least not permanently – and the place forms a spot where citizens are able to meet and realize that they are citizens. This is where public life is played out, here is where we see who we are able to be. That sounds simple but in the myth that public area is saddled with rather contradictory characteristics. Thus, the public domain is simultaneously regulated and unregulated. In order to meet each other in complete freedom these areas have to be places which are safe, where it is pleasurable to linger, which are cared for and well maintained. We appreciate it when they are well thought out, have a design. Rules must apply, but these rules must not be experienced as coercive. However, all the while we dream of a public space which bears resemblance to a wasteland, a piece of fallow ground where nothing is regulated, where proliferation holds sway.

The myth contains, as it should, an educational element. The public domain is a space where we learn how we should behave with each other, how we can be free according to certain rules. At the same time, the concept of the public domain teaches us what we are able to desire, how the no-strings-attached phenomenon, the indeterminate, implies real public domain. A public domain which is absolutely not feasible because experiencing it cannot be shared. An experience that eludes us, perhaps because, as part of the myth, it has already been feigned and the illusion is self-perpetuating.

Because we believe in it, this myth gains ground in our own surroundings and we acquire stature with it. But not everywhere. The belief in this myth runs aground on the hard reality of the public establishment of the Belgian, or perhaps better, of the Flemish periphery. The disorganized systematics of the endless succession of houses, businesses, parking areas, shopping centres, each of which emphatically claims its own area, has certainly been adequately described and analysed. But it does not alleviate the shock of the experience. The relentless stream of fences, rails, screens, hedges, walls, gateways, balustrades and meshwork, which together enclose the residual space within which – with some considerable effort – it is possible to recognize a public area, repeatedly leaves one speechless. It is a place that shamelessly disseminates the reality of personal interest and private ownership, a reality that seeks to explode the myth and send it into oblivion. Demarcated domain and infrastructure are the only modes known to this zone; the pedestrian, stroller, spectator, derivist have no place there.

This is a network of no-thoroughfare passages which in all its unwillingness could be the biotope of the misanthrope. And it comes as no surprise that Lieven De Cauter's *De Capsulaire Beschaving (The Capsular Civilization)* has its roots in this environment. But in order to avoid sinking to the level of generalized cultural pessimism, we should look more closely at the specifics of this setting, the special features of this place. De Cauter bases the sharp analysis of the capsular present on a generic image derived from Koolhaas' *Generic City*,

in which the mass presence in the public domain is replaced by directed consumerism of crowds in shopping malls. It is an image which is certainly valid for the Flemish public area, but which still mainly relies on the known surroundings of highways and suburbs. In the Flemish case the generic is, however, intersected by the traditional village character or small-scale urbanism. Not as the residue that one has forgotten to tidy up, but as essential constituent.

This persistent non-public domain allows itself to be understood only when we once again emphasize that the public space, as we would now like to discover it, that space which so likes to pose as democracy's natural space, is a myth. A myth, for that matter, that exists for good reasons, since all political systems which have known some kind of plebiscite since ancient times, have constructed places where it was possible to congregate. The agora, the basilica, the bathhouse, the central squares of the Italian city-states: there was always a clearly demarcated area where the population, or part of it, could assemble to disagree and form an opinion. Everything situated between these clearly demarcated places was privately owned, fenced and guarded, or belonged to no one. It was a transition zone, an area of passage, which could not be entered without danger because the legal and illegal authorities, working jointly, were in control. But it was precisely that interspace – the street – that was also the place where masses could gather to undermine the power uncontrollably. And it was the definitive and uncontrolled appropriation of the street by the masses in the 1960s, which gave stature to the current myth of public space.

This longing for the street possibly had its origins in the French revolution. This was the first time the street became the place where popular will could show itself. Before that, riots and uproar in the street could be dismissed as behaviour to be expected of the mob, while the real rebellion and political protest took places in the areas provided. With the French Revolution, however, the street became the stage of authentic resistance, a direct and decisive intervention in the existing structure. But from then on the street also became the stage where this authenticity, this popular will, time and again, would have to be staged. From that point the public domain acquired for the first time its double face as the place where undeveloped human desire and spectacle would meet. This ambiguity is examined in depth in the work of the Situationist International. By means of the *derive* (drift), in searching for the residual spaces of real life, the Situationists simultaneously looked out for places which could serve as a base for popular uprising. Thus, the reversal in the thinking, which characterizes public space becomes very visible: public space is not the place which permits a spontaneous lifestyle, which patiently allows various forms of entertainment and protest: on the contrary, it is a place which, because of its design, simulates and arranges this spontaneity. Constant Nieuwenhuys' *New Babylon*, created in the footsteps of the SI, is one of the first revelations within this new assignment for architecture and town planning. His design reveals structures which, exalted beyond the backward world of tradition and production, must incite the playing man to encounter and exchange. And although Constant Nieuwenhuys' dream was never realized, his design paints the programme in lurid colours, which today still challenges the layout of public space.

In Flanders, however, this appears not to be an encumbrance. There is no question of a design, let alone of open spaces which are to generate spontaneity. Any kind of candour seems to be driven out, or in any case well concealed behind fence and façade. The countryside is also missing; this is apparently entirely concentrated in the south-east of the country. Here nothing is stimulated and little is tolerated. Such refusal to provide a setting for the spontaneous means, for the myth of public space, a hard confrontation with the reality of the division of wealth. In addition, for the theory it is a tough nut to crack. When, for instance, we take the difference that Michel de Certeau makes in his *The Practice of Everyday Life* between the operation of strategy and that of tactic in the public domain then, in the Flemish context, we are faced with a serious problem. As is known, de Certeau uses the concept of strategy to describe the way in which a ruling power occupies an area, imposes its rules and withdraws from the unpredictable process of change which time brings with it. Thus, tactic stands for the way in which users of the area evade these rules and, temporarily, make their own system from it. At first sight, public space as it currently takes shape and is monitored, clearly falls under the strategy with which the authority makes its presence known. But the myth of public space teaches us that also deviation, the

spontaneous and impulsive are part of its ambition, and in that sense the dividing line between strategy and tactic cannot be clearly drawn. Along the N16, however, the tactic seems to have solidified into strategy. The two concepts, through the lack of a clear public domain, become so entangled that they become meaningless.

Is there a solution for this impasse, which indeed unmasks the myth of public domain but which, at the same time, seems only to suggest rejection? And above all, what can be thought of which does not immediately lapse back into the myth? What public domain suggests but in fact badly stages, and what here seems to be so radically excluded, is the idea of commonality, the belief in a shared interest. Places like this are literally dissensual: they repudiate the notion of consensus, but at the same time different sensory regimes are played out against each other. The fact that they give a uniform impression, in spite of their significant diversity, comes from their massiveness and through the monotonous succession of their fences.

A great deal would already be won if the diversity of these places could be more strongly expressed, if the differences were larger and especially more visible. However, this would not make for the existence of a 'better' public domain. But the wish to attain that must be dropped immediately. Every 'good' solution, even if it were one which manages to withdraw from the myth, would imply a model which would destroy a great deal of the specificity of these places. An area like the N16 reveals what Isabelle Stengers means by an 'ecology of practices': private practices, which follow their own rules, but which manage to find a certain balance with each other. And to follow Stengers' argument, a change in this ecology can only occur on the basis of a cosmopolitical intervention. Only those involved in the area, residents and users, can together and in conflict with each other, decide what should happen with each place. Only they can create the passages, open the gates and demolish the walls in order to grant to these kinds of areas something that we can perhaps call public.

SOURCES

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