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Authenticity and Construction

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The Dutch landscape is being kicked back to the past. More and more traces of man-made landscape are being ploughed under for the sake of supposed authenticity. Old sections of forest must make place for the return of long-gone heath landscapes. This tendency toward reinstating primeval landscapes has its counterpart in the new possibilities for recreation now on offer in the green belts. The transformation into parks which the Dutch landscape seemed to be undergoing for a number of years has been halted. Neat paths have been partially replaced by wilder ones over uncultivated terrain, and the same forester who ten years ago gave one a ticket for deviating from the official path now provides hikers with a handbook to help them avoid the marked routes. The Sunday outing, in which nature primarily served as a calming and relaxing backdrop for recreation and refreshment, is now often supplanted by encounters with nature in which survival plays a central role. The trend toward the 'authentic' experience can actually take several different forms. Sometimes a more recent past can be reconstructed, in which, e.g., a farm is given a primarily picturesque function and the cow serves as a stage prop.¹

More and more, art is making its appearance in the transformation of nature into an amusement park, and increasingly, artists are being asked to make a contribution to this great metamorphosis. The role which art can and wants to play in this branch of the experience economy is, however, anything but clear. While the constructed nature experience can pose as pure nature, art adds an unmistakable cultural element to nature. The most obvious opportunities for art are in fact those of the sign or the medium. The artist creates a work which, as a signal, conveys meaning to the landscape, or he underscores the experiential possibilities of a given area by intensifying one's perceptions. In both cases, the hidden possibilities appear suddenly through the context of the work of art. But through this very focusing on the experience, the artist collaborates in the relentless 'dressing up' of the world. At the great nature fair, the artist, as well, is given his own booth.²

Construction

Nature is inherently vague. While, even when framed and composed, a landscape can be convincing by virtue of its picturesque recognisability, nature itself exceeds our comprehension. And just this notion of an all-transcending, incomprehensible presence is one of the more obstinate ideologies influencing our appreciation of nature. Our longing for a place where the merely human is transcended goes back linea recta to the notion of the sublime attributed to our relationship to nature by the romantic movement. The paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, the poetry of Hölderlin: these bespeak a belief in an all powerful nature which reduces man to a mere detail. The qualities of the authentic and unspoiled we seek in nature form an inherent part of this concept and many of today's attempts to make landscapes more 'natural' can be traced back to these. The genuine and the sublime are constructions – this has long been clear – and it is consequently unproblematical to realise these as reconstructions. To the romantics, the sublime was proof of the existence of God and of man's subordinate position; today, man creates the sublime to underscore his omnipotence. Artificiality is the watchword and it is

only by means of artificiality that we can escape the laws of construction. A project whose objective was to have a large natural area declared off-limits to human beings would be able successfully to postulate the freedom from human presence as a signifier for the possible presence of the authentic. However, such a project has little chance of being realised in the Netherlands at the present time.³

The time when our belief in authenticity played the central role is long past; realisability is today's credo. Just as the nature industry, most of today's art projects are based on the assumption that experience must be created. The framing work of art turns nature into a landscape, and when the artist is conscious of this framing function, he simultaneously transforms the landscape into a new picture. An example of how this consciousness can yield excellent results is Job Koelewijn's *Cinema on Wheels*. This work, originally seen as part of a project in Ooststellingwerf, consists of a transportable box which functions as a cinema, with, in place of a screen, an opening through which the actual landscape becomes visible. The visitor sits comfortably in one of the cinema seats, the light is turned off, the music starts, and, before his eyes, the picture of his surroundings unfolds. In this way, Koelewijn demonstrates that we experience nature cinematically – the helicopter shot in the *Rocky Mountains* with which Stanley Kubrick begins *The Shining* corresponds to our primal conception of nature as an irrational and untameable phenomenon.

At the other end of the constructive spectrum is Herman de Vries. He, too, constructs a picture, but his medium is nature itself. Using purely natural elements, he creates a landscape which is entirely artificial, but nonetheless seems utterly natural. He does so without falling into the trap of primeval forests and restoration. When he lays a complex system of soil hydrology and vegetation in the Weerribben district, the result is a cultivated nature which makes no claim to authenticity except in his material. At the same time, however, he escapes the pitfall of the picturesque frame. Because he does not take a spot and invest it with meaning, but, rather, lets an expansive, differentiated area come into being and, in turn, leaves it to the laws of change, he creates the possibility of a manifold experience.⁴

Meddling in policy and decision making

The scale of De Vries' work is typical of the path pursued by landscape art in recent years. When constructing nature, the artist no longer wants to function as a magnifying glass for special spots, but rather, he wants to take part in the great game of creation of landscape architects and urban planners; he wants to contribute in deliberations about the infrastructure and recreation models, to take part in participation evenings and policy meetings. While de Vries still approaches natural sites with natural elements, for other artists, the landscape is nothing more than a residual product. Their work terrain is the area which precedes the landscape itself: the area of policy, management and decision making. The reason for this is to escape what Q.S. Serafijn a few years ago called 'the cosmetics of the void.'⁵ According to him, the artist should deploy his expertise in direct conjunction with the commissioning party, an expertise involving contextual analysis and thought devoted to problem solving in the visual and conceptual sense. Other artists however appear to go so far in this, that they have entirely exchanged tasks based on their visual expertise for conceptual and organisatory responsibilities. A good example of this is Hans Venhuizen, who considers himself a concept manager: in the last few years he has produced no works of art, but has involved himself "increasingly with designing processes through which identity tends more to be 'caused' than designed."⁶ These processes consist largely in meetings and various games in which governmental authorities and citizens devote their creative energies to a problem area together with specialists of all types.⁷

A dizzying number of elements play a role in this development, and many questions need to be asked. The transition from the visual to applied social studies seems problematical, but it is an approach in harmony with a development whereby artists use social processes as a part of their work. Today's artists want to leave more to posterity than just a forgotten statue somewhere, and more and more often, art consists of small-scale interactions with certain groups, or even individuals, without a concrete work of art necessarily coming out of

this. The small local intervention has become the basic unit of contemporary art. The ‘cosmetics of the void’ are exchanged for a surplus of human contact. The question is, however, whether this approach can be harmonised with large-scale government policy strategies. The power of visual art often lies in presenting the unexpected and incompatible. Where problem solving is involved, typically it is one which is not recognised as such. Whether this power can be deployed meaningfully in the context of management processes is doubtful. At a symposium held on the occasion of the Uiterwaardenproject (or washland project) this doubt was formulated by Paul Meurs. The desire to be taken seriously in the planning stage, is difficult to reconcile with that for independence and uncompromisingness often implicit in the artist’s personal approach. If the artist participates in the policy process he forfeits the ability to have a work of art come into being. If on the other hand, he remains on the side of art, an even greater problem results: “By virtue of his role, the concept manager is doomed to operating in the margins, since he can only attain freedom if he stays away from the actual power.”⁸

The illusion of group spirit

The eagerness with which both national and municipal governments involve artists in their decision making processes is truly amazing. Naturally, the presence of an artist provides a welcome cultural cachet, but that can also be accomplished by means of more traditional kinds of art. In connection with the Uiterwaardenproject, Bernard Colenbrander observes that “Both the Uiterwaarden model and the polder model (or consensus model) are characterised by an almost pathetic tendency toward agreement, toward the harmony model, toward bringing about complicity in truly all strata of the population, toward a relativisation of rock-hard authority and top-down mechanisms.”⁹ This scathing formulation demonstrates that there is a constant need to create a support base for government decisions by means of organised complicity. Complicity is only possible where a common goal and common interests are involved. And it is precisely in connection with the realisation of the communal that the artist offers a helping hand. In the long history of works of art which have been made at a certain location for that location, focusing on the desires of the community has played an important role. From this, the artist derives legitimacy for his work, but at the same time, the work suggests the existence of a community, a cohesion and a group spirit which either exist not at all or only temporarily. Just as the landscape is given an authentic identity, the fragmented society is, in the same way, injected with a closely knit association.

This already distrustful look can be taken even further. If we define art as a ‘doing-as-if,’ i.e., a mimetic process whereby a difference always remains vis à vis that which is being imitated, the disguising of the artist as policy-making official is seen in an entirely new light. The interaction which the artist enters into with residents and interested parties is based on an imitation of real participatory processes. That its influence on actual decision making remains minimal, is more something that has been calculated ahead of time than something problematical. The small difference which remains vis à vis actual administration can serve as an illuminating mirror. The question is, however, whether it also works that way in this case. As could be seen in the past years, the complicity of everyone in everything which seems to form the cornerstone of Dutch society, has its shortcomings. Not only does there appear to be less of a spirit of responsibility for the public domain than ever before, but the actual important decisions are being taken at an anonymous level by figures who are completely out of reach for the citizen. While it is possible for us to hold meetings for a year about the planning of a residential area, giga-projects such as the HSL-Zuid and Betuwelijn whizz on without being bothered about the absence of public support for them. Nevertheless, it is very much in the government’s interest to restore a belief in consensus. And in this connection the artist can be very useful. The imitation-participation which he organises gives meaning to the real participatory process; through the falseness of the processes he organises, the consensus model regains its credibility.

The difficult relationship between authenticity and construction

The Krabbeplass is a small pond originally created to drive a wedge between the encroaching new residential housing being built in Vlaardingen and Maassluis. Now this area, as well, is badly in need of re-planning, and in

order to find a creative solution for this task, a group of landscape architects, cultural planologists, recreation officials, policy staff and artists were placed in 'quarantine' to focus on the task for an entire weekend. Three groups were created and, in keeping with the consensus model, these were all as heterogeneous as possible. The results of their deliberations had all of the features described above. The solutions of the three groups, who were in complete and profound agreement with one another, were all based on a form of natural differentiation, with the element of authenticity playing a central role. It was recommended that the old subdivision of the landscape be restored, that the area be made accessible for recreation and, in addition, that part of the land be returned to the residents of the adjacent neighbourhoods, to enable them to do 'something' with it. Different forms of authenticity enter here into a problematical alliance with one another. The problem is that with this form of landscape construction, the impression is given of a longing for an authentic experiencing of nature and autarchy, which is not in harmony with the somewhat cynical process of the construction itself.

In 1970, Robert Smithson created the work *Partially Buried Woodshed* on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio. A derelict wooden shack was artificially covered with more and more soil, until the ridge beam snapped. But this was only the first step. Smithson donated the work to the university on condition that it would not be altered, that it would be kept as it was and would be given any necessary maintenance. In addition he explained and stipulated the following: "The entire work of art is subject to weathering which should be considered part of the work".¹⁰ In so doing, Smithson saddled the university with an intriguing conservation task, since, how can something be maintained in its original state and simultaneously in a perpetual state of decay? What is even more interesting in this connection is that he found a way to pit the picturesque, in the form of this little shady shack, and the sublime, in the form of ruins and decay, against one another in a work which brings home, in microcosm, this entire set of problematics, but which, at the same time, hardly makes any attempt to make contact with the observer;¹¹ there is no question of a special spot, the work can hardly be associated with an experience, there is hardly anything there to contemplate, something is only taken away, and nothing given back. Through his construction, Smithson reveals nature in all its sublime power. A clash between culture and nature takes place here, and it is quite clear which will ultimately win.

Notes

1. Tracy Metz, *Pret, leisure en landschap*, Rotterdam, 2002, pp. 180-194.
2. Cf. also Jouke Kleerebezem: 'Grand Canyon'. In: *Metropolis M*, no. 6 (Dec.-Jan. 2000-2001), pp. 22-23.
3. A proposal by Vincent Francois to declare the Oostvaardersplassen an independent municipality initially seemed to be headed in this direction. Cf.: *Metaforen van Ruimte en Tijd*, project of Stichting Bruggelings, Flevoland, 1996, pp. 37-43.
4. Govert Grosfeld, 'Herman de Vries en het ontwerp voor een nieuw natuurgebied', *Open*, no. 4 2003, pp. 76-83.
5. *Stedelijke restructurering A20. Het Muizengaatje en verder*, eds. Hans Abelman, Dick van Teylingen, Maarten van Wesemael. Centrum Beeldende Kunst Rotterdam, October 2001.
6. Hans Venhuizen amongst many others: *De uitvinding van het Uiterwaardenmodel*, Beuningen, 2002, p. 9.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
8. Paul Meurs, 'De rol van conceptmanager in het Uiterwaardenmodel', Beuningen, 26 September 2002, loc. cit.
9. Bernard Colenbrander, 'Draagvlak voor de cultuur, het culturele activisme van de culturele planologie', loc. cit.
10. R. Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, Ithaca/London, 1981, p. 191.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

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