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## An Injection of Planlessness

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The Zuidas is growing. Every day, a new piece of building is added to it. Where, until recently, tennis balls flew languidly back and forth, a new strip of urbanity is coming into being. It is a narrow strip – with a good wallop you could send a ball right across it. But this lack of depth is compensated for by height and weight. A new centre is coming here, a dense, high-concentration conglomerate of unusual office buildings and seductive residential structures. It must also be a place for art, a place where art can assume a new role.

The role of art in the public domain has attained immense proportions. The notion of a certain object being assigned to a certain spot has long ceased to dominate here; public art is now taking on myriad forms, including ones that are invisible. The number of approach strategies for both public spaces and the public has expanded to such an extent and contrasts so starkly with what art traditionally thought it had to offer public spaces, that it sometimes seems as if all of the avantgardistic ideals of the past hundred years had been realised in one fell swoop. In today's public spaces, art and life are in intimate contact with one another, and the most surprising aspect of this development is that it is not the product of a utopian revolutionary perspective, but has the complete support of an array of governmental authorities. As a consequence, the Netherlands are being flooded by projects for which artists are called in to contribute 'something' to the current cultural context as a kind of design impulse for our lives, and it is now generally the case that that 'something' is not automatically a well-made, recognisable work of art.

The Zuidas is a testing-ground where the entire range of public art will be playing a part. As the first works are being installed, it is becoming clear that the results will be as divergent as they are unpredictable. The more recognisable type of public art will undoubtedly be accorded a substantial place in the total scheme, as can be seen from the placement of a dog by Tom Claassen. This popular work is an early example of the bestiary which he let loose on the Dutch public space. Other examples are an impressive group of somewhat disoriented elephants, quite out of place in the barren polder outside Almere, and a hippo which will soon be swimming in the locks outside Amsterdam, equally far from home. The dog which guards the terrain of the ABN Amrobank is less exotic, but has in common with the other animals a friendly, 'pettable' character. These works are the bronze equivalent of Bartje in Assen, the animal successors of the sculptures commemorating with varying degrees of success prominent figures such as Queen Wilhelmina or the singer, Johnny Jordaan. It is art which does no harm and which, through its preference for animals, at worst might cause coming generations to cast doubt on the intellectual abilities of the Dutch living at the start of the third millennium.

Other projects, not commissioned by private companies, but primarily by the Zuidas Virtual Museum, reflect a more experimental spirit. A large video screen at Zuid WTC Station will present a mix of art, advertising and news, while a waterwork by the African artist Bodys Isek Kingelez is also planned for this area: works which, in a variety of ways lead the way in terms of zeitgeist and which at the same time will serve a clear function in the public space of the Zuidas. This cannot, however, be so easily said about a number of other initiatives from the

same angle. For example, a project has been initiated with the objective of providing temporary residence to visual artists, scientists and writers in or around the Zuidas, in the hope that, as the Zuidas grows, they will contribute 'something' to the public culture right there. That 'something' is purposely kept vague and that is, of course, the right approach, as both science and art achieve results through inquisitiveness and experimentation, rather than from concrete directives. The request directed toward a number of artists to look into the possibilities for public art for an area whose name was, with forced cheerfulness, changed from 'Drentepark' to 'Vivaldi', also fits the tendency to increasingly involve artists in the planning phase when searching for alternatives, this in the hope that a fresh light can be cast on old, atrophied habits. Precisely what is expected from such initiatives and what the ulterior motivations might be for this seemingly blind faith in the capability of artists to determine how to use public spaces without an overdose of expertise in that field, is however not completely clear.

To gain a better understanding of these developments, we need to leave the Zuidas. Last year, the Spanish artist Lara Almarcequi declared a small unplanned piece of land in the harbour of Rotterdam to be a work of art. Under the title *A wasteland*, she made a small piece of land without designated use at the water's edge behind a district office of Europoort safe from the future. Almarcequi, who has involved herself for some time with wastelands, expresses in her work her opposition to excessive designing, urban planning and landscape architecture in the Netherlands which, through planning and building, have the effect of frustrating any spontaneous development of a given area. By conceiving of this site as a work of art and thus making it off-limits to planners' frenzy and designers' fury, she calls attention to this development and her opposition to it. In so doing, she has given an important new impulse to the discussion concerning art and public spaces. As a result, the current tendency, whereby a product is not constructed, but rather, a process is initiated, is given a clear and intelligent interpretation. In principle, there is no plan for how the site will be used; virtually everything has space designated for it – the process has no end point, no purpose. The suggestion heard more frequently in recent years that process art does not occupy any space but, indeed, creates space, is given concrete form: a nameless piece of land is suddenly added to the public space and has been given meaning as a starting point for development, as a stimulus for the imagination. As a result, there is now an art form which does not appear to lend itself to problem solving, and does not 'fix' planological or architectural failures, but, rather, calls one's attention to a deficiency, and demonstrates palpably what the problem is. Consequently this work represents a standpoint diametrically opposed to the production of environmental art as formulated by the Arnhem School and which Camiel van Winkel subjected to detailed and scathing criticism in his book *Modern Emptiness*. Environmental art always involved an addition as a compensation for the sensory deprivation from which large numbers of people suddenly seemed to be suffering in the 1970s. This led to new residential areas being filled to the brim with abstract shapes in concrete and steel which were supposed to have a stimulating effect on human perception. Indeed, in those days somewhat exaggerated claims tended to be made concerning the problem-solving powers of art; ugliness, emptiness, communicative deprivation – this could all be successfully combated by means of an active art policy.

Even today, those commissioning works of art still seem inclined to deploy them as a remedy for a problem. Vinex locations must be dressed up, cities equipped with the requisite all-important 'branding.' And naturally, there are still artists ready to respond to such a request with a solution which is as adequate as it is vacuous. But in some cases, a work is created which, through its ambiguity or non-determinateness, responds with a question, thus creating a gap in the commissioners' expectations. When, for example, Hans van Houwelingen was asked to put Lelystad on the map by injecting it with more character, he did this by placing directly in the town centre a disproportionately large column with an existing statue of Engineer Lely atop it which could hardly be seen. In this way the city suddenly saw itself confronted with its exaggerated ambition; its actual smallness was underscored by the contrast with its delusions of grandeur. Nevertheless, neither the column nor the wasteland was rejected by those who had commissioned a work from these artists. It would seem that governmental authorities, typically the accessory after the fact with this type of large commission, are not unhappy about being presented with an answer in the form of a question. On the contrary, the number of requests to artists to make a contribution and/or produce plans, to investigate processes and areas where hitherto their ideas were

hardly considered worthwhile, is increasing at an incredible rate. It is as though just this ability to create gaps in established expectations were especially appreciated at this moment in time, and that artists are being called in specifically because their contribution will not contain what one usually expects from a solution to a problem. What is being asked of art would seem, to an extent, to have changed.

When we return to Almarcequi's wasteland with this insight, it seems densely planted with ambiguities. Not only is the term 'public' applied here in the broadest sense (the spot is, after all, behind fencing), but it is also located in the middle of the vast harbour area, where wasteland is quite plentiful. However, more interesting than the practical ambiguities surrounding the work are the conceptual ones. The work not only opposes the excess of design and landscape architecture overrunning the Netherlands, but it also in a sense adds a new, successful variant to it. By the very fact that this insignificant plot of land has been singled out and stamped as an officially undeveloped site, the designer's fury celebrates its ultimate victory: from now on, the formless, non-committed and untouched can also be regarded as designed. The unplanned finds its function, and in this way a latent need is, in an indirect manner, satisfied. Almarcequi's piece of unplanned land not only forces us to face the fact that unplanned sites in the Netherlands hardly have a chance to be kept unplanned, but it can also be read as a metaphor for the loss of the unplanned in our culture. A public space should, ideally, be an open space where nothing is set and everything is possible: it constitutes, in a sense, the heart of democracy, because debate and opinion formation can take place there. On a site that belongs to no one and, consequently, to everyone, free citizens can meet unimpededly to decide on their future. It is no secret that such a conception of the public space is not only extremely idealistic, but has, as well, virtually ceased to exist, since, regardless of how unclear public space may seem today as a concept, and regardless how difficult it may be for us to find something concrete there for our actions or feelings: it is regulated. Its function as a place for debate or opinion formation has totally disappeared, this for the simple reason that space is no longer available for this purpose. The existing space has been categorised and designated for functions and uses; the undesignated domain, which constitutes the prerequisite for the freedom to debate, is absent. The process responsible for this, which may have been going on for longer than we can remember, cannot just be stopped or reversed. This can, in turn, bring the governments of a democracy-based society into serious difficulties. In particular, Dutch society, with its strongly consensus oriented model, traditionally swims, as it were, on a great, babbling water surface of consultation, participation, opinion formation and collective decisions. However, the last ten years have shown that the loss of this comforting murmur, the disaffection of citizens (because they no longer believe that consultation and participation yield concrete results) has left the government with a serious need to prove its legitimacy.

If there is a great demand for anything at the present time, it is for the undesignated, i.e., the opening which can give the debate much-needed space and which has the potential to restore one's belief in democracy. But just as a plot of land can only be kept unplanned at the price of its randomness and spontaneity, an element of the planless in societal intercourse cannot just be planologically put on the map by a regulating governmental authority. The citizen who has given up hope will disregard the call to debate. And that is precisely why one has turned to art in this connection: the present shortage of the planless forms the basis of the appeal now being made to art for the public space. Because art is located outside the domain of usefulness and functionality, has no external causes and also seems to be unaffected by the fixed structures regulating daily life, it inherently has a great affinity to the planless. The choice to re-introduce planlessness through this channel into circulation is not really so strange at all. The question is, though, if the restoration of democracy is its true objective, or if only a symbolic act is involved whose sole purpose is to throw up a fog behind which the exhaustion of the human reserves can continue unimpeded.

Much is at stake. Seeking refuge in the process and the undesignated can ultimately amount to nothing more than a placebo for an uptight society. But just as placebos sometimes actually work, the planless could, once given the opportunity, take hold of our thoughts. I am envisaging a Zuidas where great towers stand in the middle of rampant green, an undesignated sight where not the planological, but natural randomness has gained

the upper hand. Everything is still possible.

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