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Art For The In-Between Zone

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Protection from nameless fears

The small town dreams of evil, just as city residents dream of rural peace and quiet. While the latter try to find the idyll to free them from the hectic pace of everyday life in a second home, allotment, window boxes or a visit to the farmers' market, the quiet life in the built-up areas between the big cities is tormented by fear of the violence and unrest that come to disrupt that peaceful existence.

Of course, the incarnation of evil settled in the small town a long time ago. It is not just in The Sopranos that the top criminals look for shelter outside the metropolis. In the Netherlands too, they show a preference for Amstelveen or Muiderberg, as if trying in an almost medieval way to escape the jurisdiction of the city by going into voluntary exile. The real reason is probably somewhat more banal. Criminals too run up against building regulations, and the small towns have much more potential for the unfettered display of wealth and bad taste. In Muiderberg, for example, there are five parking permits available per household.

The buildings that will come to fill up the heart of the Randstad will differ considerably from the existing suburbs and peripheral districts in a number of ways. As a result of the scale and the more or less central position, what emerges is somewhere between a town and a suburb. The size and anonymity will be urban, while the rural greenery that abounds there evokes a calm reminiscent of the village. That ambiguity, that indeterminate character, makes it even more necessary for the new in-between zone to exorcise evil than in the existing periphery. Screens and fences are the frameworks that give meaning to life there. The ideals of new housing estates are ruined each time by hedges and fences that break every regulation and are intended to hide the private greenery from view. It is as though the surprising Dutch habit of leaving the curtains open to reveal the absence of evil and the presence of everydayness and domesticity is here suddenly transformed into its opposite: total protection from view. When the green heart is opened up to building programmes, that built-up area will come to consist once again of greenery to a large extent, but in the form of functional hedges that will form the artificial boundary between natural and decorative greenery.

The world of the suburb is reflected in art in the work of Jeff Wall. It is also a theme in the text that Wall wrote about Dan Graham, which concentrates on the relation between the house and nature in Modernist glass buildings in the style of Mies. The large glass panels serve the occupant of the villa not only to connect the interior of the house with its natural surroundings, but above all to appropriate those natural surroundings. The life of the occupant is set against the greenery as a décor and nature is entirely subordinated to the whims of the proprietor. But at night this power relation is reversed, Wall argues, when the large glass surfaces expose the life of the occupant in every detail and dark nature peeps shamelessly inside. Perhaps it is this evil eye that the resident in an in-between zone wants to avert. The extra ring of vegetation is not so much to protect against intruders or the gaze of strangers as to exorcise the feeling of Unheimlichkeit that domesticated nature brings with it.

That unheimliche that Wall detects in suburban life also characterises his own work for the suburbs. For him evil is omnipresent in the everyday. His suburbs, however, are fundamentally different from the in-between zone that will emerge in the green heart. The US system has strict regulations regarding the delimitation of the area, so that the neighbourhoods are filled with the characteristic open lawns on which the property is clearly displayed, and the same openness is also characteristic of the area as a whole. The abundance of space in the USA and Canada creates room for indeterminate spaces, residual zones and abandoned or as yet undesignated sites where the unnameable can take place. Its presence, however, seems to open up the terrain, the indeterminate is not a ghostly spectre that can turn up unexpectedly on the doorstep, but it has a place of its own. The landscape of the Netherlands has hardly any terrain of this kind, and that situation will certainly not change in the future. Once again we come across a curious paradox: the limited availability of land leads not to more openness and sharing, but to closedness and enclosure.

The in-between zone dreams of evil and tries to protect itself from it as best it can. That is why everything is divided up into plots as far as possible, so that no indeterminate places are left for evil to settle in. But every act of division and exclusion creates a network of in-between zones, routes and shortcuts that remain when all the rest has been apportioned.

Culture as mooring-post

Just south of Ghent lies St-Martens-Latem, the major artists' village of Flanders at the beginning of the twentieth century. Art still seems to occupy the centre of attention there: there are galleries, artists live and work there, and it attracts many visitors. But it is not immediately obvious what they come for. True, the village has been restored to total picturesqueness, but at first sight there does not seem to be much going on. The village is filled with more restaurants and hotels than art: artists' homes have been converted into catering or hotel accommodation. And that is the main activity: eating and sleeping, plus a stroll through the remains of the picturesque landscape that once attracted the Flemish masters. Most of that landscape, however, has disappeared under a maze of streets and lanes flanked by the brick buildings that the average Belgians have dreamed of.

It is interesting to see how the historic landscape is reduced to a timeless setting in which the historical fantasy can be played out. The notion of catalogue home takes on an unprecedented dimension here. Old Saxon farms border on English cottages, which in turn rub shoulders with buildings in a somewhat German-Romanesque style. The irony that the diversity of the individual building styles leads to the same uniformity to which the residents are so bitterly opposed does not seem to dawn on them, but perhaps it is of no importance. The feeling of relief upon detecting a Modernist-style villa that seems to reduce the rest to kitsch is misplaced too. The neo-Corbusier is a pastiche just like the rest, the logic of repetition and reference applies to these buildings just as much as to the others. The motivation for this historical plurality is simply due to the freedom of choice. The members of today's well-to-do class indulge themselves with their own taste and live in the setting that they like best. They can get everything they want from internet, so why should the same not apply to the house of their dreams? But this tautology is not entirely satisfying because it only confirms the will to choose, while leaving

the content of that choice open. Perhaps the reason for that should be sought in the invisible interior rather than in the exterior. These houses are small bubbles of self-complacency, they are literally satisfied with themselves, because most of them are organised as smoothly functioning machines. All the devices and connections in the house make for an easy life that can link up with the outside world at any chosen moment and in every possible way for entertainment or contact. In this sense, this kind of housing is the logical outcome of the Modernist ideal of the machine à habiter. But this device that is entirely customised to the occupant and no longer requires any surroundings brings the uprootedness of modern life with it in a very decided way. The machine à habiter does not need a site, it can stand anywhere, and the residents of the new in-between zones share the same lack of roots. The in-between where they are situated offers them every possible freedom, but is interchangeable with any other in-between career or home elsewhere. The residents thus have a freedom – the homeless ideal of the nomad is just around the corner – which at the same time deprives them of any idea of personality in order to render them available for the market. So their dream home poses a double problem: not only is it a device that, like most devices today, no longer has a clear-cut form – machine aesthetics is a form of nostalgia – but this shapeless entity can also be carried away on the breeze because it is not anchored anywhere. The historical samples from which they draw thus serve above all to clothe the device and to suggest historical roots, even though they are entirely groundless.

The in-between itself, the space between the bubbles, also known as public space, is reduced to a minimum. The winding roads are no wider than a cart-track to emphasise the rural aspect and to maintain the feeling of exclusiveness. There are no pavements to the streets: pedestrians are unnecessary and undesirable. For the house is primarily, as Sloterdijk puts it, an immune system. Everything is arranged so that the occupants can move as freely as possible, while at the same time enjoying maximal protection: ‘The modern home is a place to which uninvited guests have virtually no access. Toxic people have to be kept outside, as well as bad news where possible. The home is used as an ignorance machine or as an integral defence mechanism. It is the architectural support to the basic right to avoid contact with the outside world’ (Sloterdijk, 540). Perhaps art is still present in this in-between zone, perhaps this is where the Belgian collectors live who are often spoken about so eagerly in the Netherlands, but if it is there it is not visible.

Roundabouts and enclaves

Belgian scenarios will probably not happen here, but when the green heart is opened up, it will mean a maximal freedom of choice for at least a sector of the future residents. The Netherlands is also receiving its portion of catalogue homes, as many new housing estates already show. But the dormant social consciousness will prevent the whole of the green heart from being filled with villa pathways and golf links. The housing shortage is so acute in the Randstad that this new reservoir will also be filled with Vinex-like areas. The idea of integration will no doubt still play a part in that process, because policy does not change that quickly, even though nobody believes that it is going anywhere. In other words, a mixture will emerge of green zones, expensive homes, sports accommodation, smaller homes crammed together in neighbourhoods with strips of council housing in between. The result will be an area full of enclaves, bubbles filled with housing bubbles, alternating with other functions, but all separated from one another by clear-cut boundaries with the inevitable roundabouts at the intersections.

If the roundabout is the dominant characteristic of the in-between zone and the circle is the perfect symbol of the enclave, then we can interpret that shape as referring to the process that creates the in-between zone and as a definition of the place that art can occupy there. Current process management insists on involving all parties in the design process, resulting in a supple flow that avoids senseless ideological bottlenecks. Everyone is a party in the no-man’s land of public space, just as all directions are equal at a roundabout. But just as the roundabout gives right of way to the traffic that is on it, so everything in process management is up for discussion except the movement that enforces the model itself. There is an axis at the centre around which everything revolves, an axis that keeps the process in motion, but it does not actually form a part of that process. In the process management that is being followed at the moment for the content of the Netherlands, that axis is The Market.

All interests and interested parties are subordinate to this overarching interest that has no face but constantly appears to be the main factor. The consequence of the model is that the final outcome cannot be raised for discussion because the interested parties were involved, while that outcome has been reached for unfathomable reasons in a completely opaque way.

The no-man's land in the middle of a roundabout is regarded by many local authorities as the ideal spot for a nice work of art. It is a spot that cannot be put to any other use and that behaves naturally like a pedestal. For many artists, however, that spot is a nightmare, because the tendency to place isolated works is regarded as somewhat outdated and the choice of this very location makes it almost impossible to embed the work in its surroundings. Instead of the traditional practice of filling in a designated location, cultural planning is deployed nowadays, a model in which the artist is already involved in the development of an area at an early stage so that the artistic element, the artist's vision, or what is different is given a chance in the planning process. This procedure seems to be an ideal opportunity for the role of art in the development of the green heart. Although it is difficult at the moment to talk about the results of cultural planning, it appears questionable whether it is so beneficial for the role of the artist. Process management has the tendency to sweep everything that blocks the process from the table. Visions are invited in the process just as easily as they are dismissed. If we assume that the artist's procedure will still be a bit recalcitrant or autonomous, because that is after all the added value of his participation in the process, that will be the obstacle that has to be smoothed over as quickly as possible. On the other hand, if the artist's contribution is included in the plan, the result might be even worse. In that case the artist becomes responsible for a result to which he has only contributed to a limited extent, as most of it will give priority to the law of the market against all other interests. In fact, the artist's contribution – the work of art – thereby ends up in the middle of the roundabout again. It is in the middle of an unmovable no-man's land that is imposed on the existing terrain from above. Cultural planning attempts to introduce several layers of meaning to the design process. To that end, it likes to create an underlay to connect all the parts with one another, a fictive map that digs old river beds up again, makes survivals of customs and traditions visible, in short, imposes a pattern on the planning area that explicitly behaves as if the enclaves do not exist, as if another meaning is as important, if not more so, than the meaning of the market that has divided up the planning area into plots of land. This deeper layer is a mere palliative for the bleeding to death of the public space. It is just as simultaneously fictive and real as the historical styles on which the villa occupant freely draws, but while in the latter case the fantasy of roots is intended to stop the house from drifting away and to anchor it firmly to that spot, cultural planning serves to keep the isolated enclaves together in an imaginary past, to compress the isolated bubbles into foam. The roundabout is the knot that ties the enclaves together, while cultural planning confers meaning on the fabric.

Virus and injection

The enclave is reality, in that sense process management is right. No cultural planning can change that at all. So the enclave has to be taken completely seriously and not treated as an integral part of a happy and harmonious whole. The enclave, from the smallest house bubble to the largest neighbourhood bubble, wants to shield and protect itself from the Other, and that desire, which policy tries to appropriate by presupposing the absence of an identity, offers the scope that the artist can make use of. The model of sub-districts that has fragmented Amsterdam is ideal for the in-between zone. It would turn the indeterminate conglomerate into an entity that is just as difficult to administer, but a very active one in which the parts vigorously defend their own interest. The random clustering of residents who have sought their refuge in the enclave shares in the first place the fear of intruders and disruption. Nothing that comes from outside can bode well. And that is precisely the foundation on which they create their identity – the universal fear takes on a guise of its own in each enclave. Art is the appropriate instrument to make this paranoid identity visible, not by allowing the busybodies among the residents to take part in a pseudo-democratic process and infallibly choose the wrong design from the proposals that are put forward in response to a wrongly formulated assignment, but by giving artists a place in the attempt by the enclave to understand itself as a community. The assignment will be: give us a face. The answer will be: look, this is what you are afraid of. The place where this art can nestle seems to be particularly promising

precisely in the in-between zone.

Public space and communication are concepts that played a large part in the actions of the avant-gardes and protest movements of the 1960s. There was plenty of ground to be won from a paternalistic government that imagined itself to be lord and master of the street. Since then communication and public space have appeared on the political agenda as part of official intentions and policy. That shift can be seen as a double movement: on the one hand as a recovery – the street must become controllable again – and on the other hand as a demonstration that the government is systematically beginning to retreat. Nowadays public space and communication are still exclusively part of a strategy in the sense of Michel de Certeau: they are a means for a particular power to establish and affirm itself. And because they are appropriated as a problem, they cannot be liberated again, they are liberated for ever, as it were, by always being placed on the concern agenda. The public space in that sense has become inaccessible to artists who do not want to behave as an extension of anonymous government enforcement. The future of art lies in the in-between zone.

The spaces between the smaller and larger housing bubbles, the area that used to be called the street, are the spaces that the enclaves do their best to ignore as a necessary evil, but at the same time those spaces are precisely that which connects them with one another. They are in-between spaces, just large enough to enable you to move from one spot to the other, but at the same time the spaces where injection and infection may occur. For although the bubbles think that they are self-sufficient and individual, they display remarkable similarities. This is not the result of consultation or exchange, since communication takes place exclusively by means of networks that are preferably not local, but because without knowing it they follow the same examples by which they have been infected. To quote Sloterdijk again: 'Their similarity results not from direct exchange between the cells, but through the mimetic infiltration of similar patterns, stimuli, infectious commodities and symbols in each and every one of them'. The effect of the in-between spaces can only be understood if we abandon the notion of public space. On the one hand, they are indeterminate traffic spaces, residual areas that are not public but are accessible and whose indeterminate character makes them a breeding-ground for what is different. In addition, they are above all commercially divided plots of land with explicit codes, but it is precisely there, in the densely populated zones that seem absolutely safe, that undesired transfer has a chance. The in-between space is thus the area of the virus, the place from where contamination can find its destination.

From inside to outside, and afterwards as though it were beforehand, and not beforehand which actually comes afterwards. Not turning reality into fiction, but fiction into reality. For art the in-between space is the spot that can be won from the assignment, the formulation of the question as is so often the case in artistic practice. The in-between space of indeterminacy, which is experienced as threatening to the cells and bubbles, can be transformed into a terrain of new possibilities and promise. This can take on many forms, but they will only be genuinely successful if they satisfy a number of conditions. In opposition to the current cultural planning trend, the in-between space must not be given meaning beforehand by the artist as part of a government strategy to exorcise its own fear in that way, but afterwards, when the job seems to have been done and the enclave thinks that it has found its shape. It is also a question of an attempt to confer meaning on time and history again. Cultural planning projects a condensed and partly fictive past onto the area that is to be developed to provide an artificial prior legitimisation, which must satisfy the demand for roots and security, for everything that will subsequently be imposed on top of what is already there. The artist who operates in the existing in-between space, however, can manage to make new possibilities visible and to transform the existing situation into something that precedes what is still to come. As an extension of that, you might say that the opposition between fiction and reality has to be reversed. While the enclave is planned in accordance with a process that covers the existing situation with a layer of fiction, the work of art can manage to show the fictive, the potentially real.

The way in which Jeanne van Heeswijk is getting The Blue House on IJburg to work at the moment can perhaps be taken as an example. This urban villa situated in the middle of a block of flats has been rented for a number

of years and is temporarily occupied by successive groups of artists. Residence is semi-permanent: a new group of artists arrive every couple of months, as if they stand for the residents who will also probably only settle in the area for a limited period. But during those few months they are actively involved with the enclave, not to expose or to reinforce its social structures – each of them is new there – but to explore the potential of the area at the same pace as the residents. In this way customs and life-styles can be created that infiltrate the other housing bubbles. The accessibility of the house, the open behaviour of its residents from outside, are at odds with the tendency of the others to enclose themselves within fences. A reversal of that model can also be seen in the glass houses that Jelle Post and Paul Toornend create under the title *Untitled Space*. Using a kind of virtual photography, they create completely transparent homes where privacy no longer seems to have any meaning. There is no place for fear to hide there, so they show that there is nothing to be afraid of.

The presence of what is different or slightly deviant in the in-between spaces will undoubtedly provoke irritation. Strangely enough, that is probably a precondition for the proper functioning of the enclave. The self-complacency of the better situated enclaves in particular inevitably leads to boredom. Once you are satisfied with yourself, you soon feel something missing. On the other hand, the shortage of facilities for self-indulgence in the other enclaves will perhaps lead to a more aggressive but equally hopeless form of boredom. The stimulus that can be introduced by art must not be confused with the sensory stimuli with which the Arnhem School tried to liven up the new suburbs. That was a question of boredom too, but that boredom was diagnosed exclusively as sensory. The abstract forms and colours that were introduced into the public space not only destroyed that public space in a very professional way, because the public space became a part of a deliberate policy, as explained above, but also bore the mark of an interfering government that was too stingy to provide good housing but was alert enough to realise that the *Verelendung* that had been created could give rise to a lot of trouble. The aggression that these works sometimes provoked was not due to lack of understanding; on the contract, they were correctly seen for what they were: empty palliatives.

Stimulus and choice are not the terms for these injections in the in-between. After all, it is now possible to smuggle in an overwhelming number of stimuli through all the possible multimedia channels. That they are multimedia and not real is only a problem in the case of growing teenagers: they usually still prefer the tangible emptiness of being together to the virtual filling of the mass media. Art in the in-between will have to side both with the virtual and with what is physically present because that is the only way to cover the registers of attention that are active in the enclave. But above all it will have to come both from inside and from outside: from inside in the sense that it is connected with living and surviving in the bubble; from outside because the in-between where art nestles has to become visible as an area that should not be suppressed with historical panaceas and where the indeterminate is not just menacing.

It is the in-between that shows the enclaves how much space there is inside and outside their bubbles where a viral infection can function as an injection against the overwhelming boredom. The work of Bik van der Pol seems to be responding precisely to this with the exhibition *Love & Happiness* that she organised in Museum De Paviljoens in 2001 in Almere, which can be regarded as a prototype of the new in-between zone. At a central point in the building she installed a sort of carousel in which visitors could cuddle up but also dream about escape at the same time. When the museum closed at the end of the day, the space beneath it was illuminated in red. The indeterminate residual space there took on a dangerous force of attraction. It evoked everything that the enclave frenetically tries to exclude, and indicated everything that might happen there.

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