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No Mans Land

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'Public space' is a dubitable concept. What used to be called 'the street' suddenly acquired a new name a couple of decades ago. This is usually a sign that something is going on. The street was a place where anything could happen, but it could also be remarkably quiet, and while the first was seen as socio-politically disruptive, the second was primarily considered a commercially disadvantageous. With the discovery of the concept 'public space', this indeterminate situation came to an end. Specification and allocation enabled combining greater surveillance with greater commercial potential. These days, urban areas are largely carefully zoned. You know where to go to shop, go out or relax. Indistinctness has been replaced by monocultural intensification. Ambiguity has been usurped by clarity.

From the early nineteen-seventies, public areas were more distinctly designed as user spaces and it is perhaps no coincidence that, in the same era, art in public space emerged as an activity. With the abstract symbols of the Arnhem School, art climbed down from its pedestal to mingle with the public, and since then no square or street has been free of concrete ridges or rusting obstructions intended to inject the indifferent routine of passersby with a greater level of awareness and animation. And although the remains of these works are only visible here and there, the accent on stimulating and intensifying experience has never evaporated. Since then, public space has predominantly become a space for doing things. Designing outdoor space has boomed and the unsuspecting Rambler is accosted by seating elements, wastepaper baskets, green areas and other obstacles. Nor have town squares managed to evade intervention. In today's prevalent attention deficit ideology, they have mostly become transformed into places where any second devoid of hysterical activity is considered lost.

The upgrading of the street to public space was instantly confronted with a response in the form of a guerrilla-style disruption of the overall picture. One can see graffiti as an attempt to rescue the street from the vice-like grip of town planners and administrators, and to make it a place where the normal and the random collide. Unfortunately, their power to subvert gets lost in the process. Not only has the formal language stagnated into a colourful homogeneity, but its power has become just as anodyne through a persistent hanging on to the system of names and words that only have meaning to the adept. Graffiti, with this, got stuck in the triumph of the sign that reached particularly dizzying heights in the nineteen-eighties. The resurgence of belief in content, visible for instance in attempts at engagement in the visual arts, seems largely to have passed graffiti makers by. Nowadays graffiti is more a tradition than an antithesis, a ritual banned to the margins of the city or neatly channelled onto walls provided by the local council for that purpose. Like its despondent pals the youth club, skate park and coffee shop, graffiti has thus become nothing more than an official early retirement from adulthood. That said, graffiti still offers an interesting perspective. This is not to be found in its quasi-illegal nature, but rather in what affiliates it to art: graffiti is paint.

Every artwork carries with it something of the museum, and in public space this is a particular burden. Not because it confers upon the work the stigma of elitist and incomprehensible, but because, outside the museum,

being branded as a 'work of art' hampers rather than elucidates meaning. As a rule, art in public space balances between being recognizable as art and being comprehensible in another framework. The best works succeed in maintaining this equilibrium, creating a sort of vacuum of meaning that sometimes even elicits conflicting interpretations. This midpoint is also sought in projects in which the artwork primarily consists of social interaction with residents. Here, again, a precarious balance is at issue between art disguised as social engineering and average art with pretensions to social commitment. Basically, all art in the public domain is saddled with the dilemma that it wants to achieve the unexpected, the left-field or the anomalous while simultaneously being part of a government strategy to make public space manageable. Grooming outdoor space is a process that, with design and regulation, avoids potential conflict situations and, wherever possible, boils down conflicting needs or interpretations to a single denominator. With this both the object-oriented and more process-oriented works in public space are at risk of, with the best of intentions, filling the outdoor space in a way that fits seamlessly into the preponderant horror void. The ultimate consequence of this situation is the decision to give people a chance to have their say in the planned artwork. While in socio-cultural projects the participation of locals may concern actual problems, and intend to give people more control of their own lives, the democratization of the art commission is nothing but a shrewd, hollow manoeuvre. It is a way of scripting the transformation from user space to public space as being in line with residents' wishes, while the choice process, with its total exclusion of any form of surprise or risk is a prime example of the management strategy exercised everywhere in the name of public domain.

The dilemma the visual arts believes that public space presents it with, not only affects what it shows but, more specifically, the medium, the material used. That social projects work with social fabric that is no different to the social relations that regulate our everyday lives is immediately obvious. These works then also require a compelling pendant in the art domain for the sake of equilibrium. More concrete types of art struggle with the reverse: to escape being unequivocally designated artwork, they often opt for materials and presentation means that do not jar in the public domain. But the problem of using media like photography, video and light is the threat of going unseen among the plethora of other illuminated information carriers.

An added problem is that these fleeting media contradict themselves, trading their temporality for an indestructible, permanent presence. Unassailability or invulnerability, the criterion that artworks are 'vandal-proof', seem the essential requirements for commissions in public space. The general starting point is that, on the street, anything with the potential to be destroyed, is destroyed. This may largely be true, but are artworks in public space really as attractive to vandals as is commonly supposed? Artworks are seldom covered in graffiti and it is very likely that, besides the normal amount of everyday senseless violence, art in public is more often destroyed when there is conflict about its placement. The stress on invulnerability would, in this case, only serve to enhance aggression because it underlines appropriation of the public area with a thing that has every intention of staying put.

The opposite of public space is no-mans land, an area that shirks permanent claim, ungoverned by any specific legislation and where all is possible, in principle. A place that, because of this, can constantly be rewritten with new layers of meaning. These days, this no-mans land seems further away than ever. Artworks may, it's true, be capable of expressing confusion and ambiguity in a certain location, but all too often this serves as a symbolic compensation for the one-dimensionality imposed on the area. Rather than creating space, artworks take up space and with this are unavoidably connected to the government strategy that endeavours to activate and control.

Nonetheless, art offers a way of eluding this diabolical dilemma. Just as graffiti was able to stain the built environment with its arcane actions, painting – the least public of all public art – can transform the space to an uncharted realm precisely because of its improbable presence. Not in the form of a clearly bounded painting, because that, with its framing, immediately renders public space a museum domain. But in the form of a painting which overlays the thin skin of its own world onto the existing one. A membrane, instantly tangible,

recognizable as the residue of an action that cannot escape the ravages of time, that is not invulnerable and with this appropriates nothing. Every painted layer alludes to the presence of the layer beneath and it is precisely this striation of layers and meanings that the public domain needs to evade the clutch of 'public space'.

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