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Open! Platform for Art, Culture and the Public Domain **happens to include, in its very title, at least two misreadings…**

But, through an error, a German artisan in Amsterdam arrived at the truth and its recognition by the strangest roundabout way. For when he had come to this great and rich commercial city full of splendid houses, swaying ships and busy people, his eye was at once caught by a large and handsome house, such as he had never yet experienced on all his wanderings from Tuttlingen to Amsterdam. … Finally he could not refrain from addressing a passer-by. "My good friend," he said to him, "couldn't you tell me the name of the gentleman who owns this wonderfully beautiful house with its windows full of tulips, daisies and stocks?" But the man, who presumably had something more important to do and unfortunately understood just as much of the German language as the questioner of Dutch, that is to say nothing, said shortly and brusquely, "Kannitverstan," and buzzed past.

Now this was a Dutch word, or three if you want to be exact, and means … "I can't understand you." But the good stranger believed that this was the name of the man he had asked about. He must have been an awfully rich man, this Herr Kannitverstan, he thought and went on. …

But just as he was thinking, if I had it as good as this Herr Kannitverstan, only once – he turned a corner and saw a long funeral procession. … Now our stranger was seized by a melancholy feeling, which never passes a good man by when he sees a corpse, and he stood there devoutly with his hat in his hands until they had all passed by. However he went up to the last man in the procession, who was just then calculating silently how much he would profit from his cotton if it went up ten guldens a hundredweight, gently took hold of his cloak and innocently begged his pardon. "That must have been a good friend of yours," he said, "for whom the bell is tolling, that you are following the procession so sadly and pensively." "Kannitverstan!" was the reply. … "Poor Kannitverstan," he exclaimed, "what profit do you get from all your wealth now? What I will get from my poverty some day too: a shroud and a sheet, and from all your beautiful flowers – perhaps a sprig of rosemary on your cold chest or a rue." [1]

Open! – Platform for Art, Culture and the Public Domain happens to include, in its very title, at least two misreadings that are similar to those in Hebel's short story. Hebel's piece is a parable of language constructing epistemologies while the term "open" has acquired semantic glitches that cut right into contemporary art, political and economic issues. The first misreading is linguistic, while the second is political. To turn to a personal kannitverstan-like anecdote: When I began working for the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam, I was surprised to discover that its Fine Arts Bachelor program had been offering a one-semester course called "Het publieke domein" (The public domain), for years, if not decades. But in this context, "het publieke domein" primarily meant "public

space", and for the visual arts more specifically: art in public spaces, particularly open air sculpture.

In English, "public domain" primarily refers to intellectual property. Works whose copyrights have expired or been waived are then said to be in the public domain where they can be freely used and reused for whatever purpose, with or without attribution, such as Johann Peter Hebel's text cited above. In the 1970s and into the 1980s, American national research grants were offered on the condition that the results would appear in the public domain. This led the computer science departments of the University of California at Berkeley and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, among others, to develop networking technology that later became known as the Internet and to computer operating systems that later became known as Open Source Software.

The Cold War liberal politics at the time fostered the creation of open-air sculptures in Dutch municipalities, even if these sculptures have never been in the public domain in the sense of intellectual property. Both could be seen as examples of "Open Society", a concept that was coined by political philosopher Karl Popper in 1945, in the eponymous book that also addressed "its enemies", fascism and socialism. Besides the linguistic glitch regarding the "public domain" as either open air or nonright works, this also reveals a political glitch in the word "Open". From Popper to the Open Source movement, "open" and "freedom" became the keywords of economic neoliberalism and its more radical cousin, the Ayn Rand school of libertarianism. Popper founded the Mont Pelerin Society in 1947 together with Friedrich August von Hayek and Milton Friedman, which, to this day, remains the most important think tank of free market economics. Academic economists call it "neoclassical", its influential Milton Friedman branch is referred to as "monetarist". In his 1978–1979 lectures on "The Birth of Biopolitics"" Michel Foucault coined and popularised the term "neoliberalism" for neoclassical economics.

Open Source and Open Source media were originally by no means opposed to neoliberal theories. In fact, the term Open Source was coined in 1998 by the right-wing libertarian-dominated Open Source Initiative, while Wikipedia was founded in 2001 by two Ayn Rand acolytes.

But the lines cannot be drawn simply along ideological lines, as the above paragraph seems to suggest. In 1960, painter Asger Jorn drew on Popper for his Situationist manifesto "Open Creation and Its Enemies". When applied to economics, "open" can mean one thing as well as its exact opposite: the privatisation of public infrastructure (in the sense of opening up state property to the free market), or the reverse, making private property public. In the case of so-called new media, which includes Open Source software and the Internet, they often mean both simultaneously: services that are both public and commercial. In his 1998 essay, "The Holy Fools", Richard Barbrook touted this as "a really-existing form of anarcho-communism". However, the Silicon Valley "Californian ideologues", as Barbrook called them in the very same text, might have no fundamental disagreement with him, but only prefer the term "anarcho-capitalism" to "anarcho-communism". Fifteen years later, the two seeming opposites sound very much like each other, with neither sounding much like a utopian promise anymore, and actually more like an accumulation of nightmares.

In this same historical period, intellectual property was criticised and undermined by the same strange alliances that arose between neoliberalism, anarcho-capitalism and, to quote sociologist Robert Merton, the "communism of the scientific ethos" as well as what could be called the communism of the arts / activist ethos. The concept of antiright, when thoroughly thought through and put into practice, implies nothing less than the end of the artist's autonomy, as well as the end of all twentieth-century's creative industry business models. Much of contemporary art seems to have withdrawn into its own safe havens and

gated communities – white cubes, biennials, e-flux – places where it can afford to be oblivious of these contemporary issues.

The contemporary art world that actually lives up to its name, however, has been delving into the speculative perversions and nightmares of neoliberal economics, globalisation and network society since 1998. *Open!* has expanded the traditional Dutch arts concept of "het publieke domein" to include a larger aesthetic-philosophical, media-theoretical and political-economic issue by taking a similar plunge into the field of art criticism. The perverted ambiguity that the word "Open" gained as a consequence of neoliberalism and the dotcom age can now be used as a provocative point of departure.

The third large issue that lurks behind the title *Open! – Platform for Art, Culture and the Public Domain* concerns the very notion of "art" in a globalised world where it is by no means culturally universal. as well as the very word "culture", with its legacy of nineteenth-century culturalism and national romanticism. "Kannitverstan" serves as a beautiful and clear-cut example of different cultures: "cantunderstand" declares the end of hermeneutics in the very same year in which Friedrich Ast's book *Grundlinien der Grammatik, Hermeneutik und Kritik* established the concept of literary hermeneutics. The task for *Open!* may very well be to simply better understand the notions that its title alludes to by not taking them for granted.

Florian Cramer is a reader at Willem de Kooning Academy / Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam and volunteer for the Rotterdam-based arts initiatives PrintRoom, De Player and Awak(e). 'When I worked in university humanities, people were romanticizing the arts – as a realm of unrestrained experimentation, freeing them from the constraints of academic research. When I went on working in an art school, people were romanticizing research – as the last resort of artistic autonomy.' He is author of the book *Anti-Media Ephemera on Speculative Arts* (2013) and co-author of *Pattern Discrimination* (2018).

Footnotes

1. Johann Peter Hebel, *Kannitverstan*, 1808, English translation from *First German Reader: A Beginner's Dual-Language Book*, Harry Steinhauer (ed.), (Bantem Foreign Language, 1964), p. 181.

Tags

Art Discourse, Media Society, Public Domain

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