Art as a Public Issue
How Art and Its Institutions Reinvent the Public Dimension

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For a long time, the public sphere as a space in which rational debates are conducted, free of prescriptive forces, and public space as a common world were guiding concepts in the discourse on publicness defined by such thinkers as Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt. These enlightened forms of 'civilized publicness' seem far removed from either the theory or the practice of the present day. Neoliberal forces, such as privatization and commercialization, are torpedoing the idealized modern concepts of the public sphere, which is being increasingly defined, in terms of a practical project, by acute expectations concerning security and threat. At the same time, public space is being claimed by groups and audiences such as illegal aliens, refugees and migrants, who are not accounted for, or only minimally, in official policy dealing with this space.

Indeed, current thinking about the public sphere and publicness is no longer based on models of harmony in which consensus predominates. Repeated references are made to Jacques Ranci¯re or Chantal Mouffe, who emphasize the political dimension of public space and its fragmentation into different spaces, audiences and spheres and in whose view forms of conflict, dissensus, differences of opinion or 'agonism' are in fact constructive and do justice to many. This means public space has once more become an urgent topic in the debate on liberal democracy, a debate which, supported by radical-leftist philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben or Alain Badiou, is increasingly focusing on the relationship between politics and life, in which 'the political' often runs counter to politics itself.

In the wake of these developments, the artistic space of art and its institutions is also repeatedly considered as a social or even political space, as a public issue. The aesthetic and the political are played off against each other, and new questions are being formulated about autonomy and serviceability. This issue of *Open* examines how art and its institutions are reinventing, reformulating or re-legitimizing their public dimension and involvement. A neutral position, after all, seems at the very least naïve here: both art and art institutions still manifest themselves at the sufferance of the public, the audience. They cannot avoid re-examining what is public (or not) and why, who the audience is and how they want to relate to it. Do they dare become part of 'the political', or do they let themselves become instruments of market players and party politics?

Chantal Mouffe postulates her 'agonist' model of space and the role she sees for the artist within it. Nina Möntmann outlines how small art institutions can play the role of the 'wild child' and adopt a meaningful (counter)position in public space. Simon Sheikh observes that the erosion of the nation-state has produced a post-public situation, in which the public sphere or 'the public' can no longer be precisely localized.

The controversy sparked in Germany by Gerhard Richter's stained-glass windows for Cologne Cathedral inspires Sven Lütticken to reflect on the cathedral, the museum and the mosque as public space. Sjoerd van Tuinen argues for a Sloterdijk-esque perspective on

the public sphere, in which the intimate is taken seriously and art actualizes concrete forms of 'conviviality'. Artists Bik Van der Pol have produced a contribution about a spot in the Park of Friendship in Belgrade that was once the planned site of the Museum of Revolution.

Jan Verwoert rejects the idea that artists and exhibition makers should be required to identify their audience. To him, this reeks of an economic legitimization of culture, and he sees anonymity, on the contrary, as a pre-requisite to meaningful encounters in the cultural domain. In its column, 16Beaver denounces the reduction of the world, of art and of its institutions to numbers, because 'the stakes are immeasurable'. BAVO calls on artists to link radical artistic activism with radical political activism.

As curator of the Dutch pavilion at the last Venice Biennale, Maria Hlavajova, artistic director of BAK in Utrecht, worked with Aernout Mik, who produced the video installation *Citizens and Subjects*. This led her to consider the relationship between art and society, as well as such concepts as community and nationalism. Florian Waldvogel questions Kasper König about his experiences with 'Skulptur Projekte Münster', which König organized from 1977 to 2007, and in the process outlines the evolution of the relationship between art, public space and the urban environment. Max Bruinsma spoke with Jeroen Boomgaard, professor of Art in the Public Space at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, and Tom van Gestel, artistic director of SKOR, about the role of art in a public space where public-private partnerships dominate and where public interests are mixed with economic and managerial interests.

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Tags

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