

# Autonomous Community Art in Private-Public Space

Max Bruinsma in Conversation with Jeroen Boomgaard and Tom van Gestel

*Max Bruinsma*

Interview – January 1, 2007

**What role is there for art to play in a public space that is increasingly marked by public-private partnerships and in which public interests are more than ever mixed with economical and security concerns? A conversation with Jeroen Boomgaard, lecturer on Art in Public Space of the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, and Tom van Gestel, artistic leader of SKOR.**

According to the editorial concept of this issue of *Open*, there is a ‘crisis of the public sphere, of public institutions, spaces and tasks’. The question is how art and its institutions should react to this crisis. Indeed, public space has become more and more contested, particularly when it comes to defining what ‘public’ actually means. Freedom and safety, once two concepts that were, if not synonymous at least intimately linked, seem to have grown into two opposite poles in the struggle for arranging public space. The freedom of someone to say and do what he or she wants can jeopardize the safety of another. And the need of political and economical stakeholders for a safely predictable and controllable environment, warranted by public and privatized surveillance agencies, is often at odds with the need for freedom and individuality felt by independent and responsible citizens.

Where does art stand in this debate? As of old, on the side of the ‘most individual expression’? Or on that of symbolizing whatever there remains of collectivity in today’s atomized society? Certainly when looking at art in public space, that question is not so easy to answer. ‘Community art’ is in vogue these days, but it is still often based on the subjective concepts and interventions of one independent and autonomous person: the artist. And cultural institutions are assessed on the basis of a paradoxical combination of demands: they have to enlarge their audience (read: please more people), and at the same time mediate between art and society (read: protect the artist’s idiosyncratic position as a tolerated anomalous individual). This does not transpire without friction. But is this clash of opposing interests and concerns a sign of crisis, or is it the icing on the cake of a society and culture that develop by fits and starts?

I asked two insiders in the field of art in public space, an art historian and a

**facilitator. One, Jeroen Boomgaard, is lecturer on Art in Public Space, connected to the Rietveld Academy and the University of Amsterdam, and focuses on the Zuidas area, where the Virtual Museum Zuidas is developing a new condition for art in public space. The Virtual Museum's supervisor, Simon den Hartog, works there alongside project developers in a mega-business quarter, which is now being built by a massive public-private partnership on the South axis (Zuidas) of Amsterdam.<sup>1</sup> The other is Tom van Gestel, artistic leader of SKOR and chairman of the Artistic Team of Beyond, the organization that is developing a programme for art in the public space of another mega-building project, the expansion of the city of Utrecht in Leidsche Rijn.<sup>2</sup> To both I put the question of the possibilities and role of art in such partly privatized public spaces, in which enormous economical interests are at play. In such areas, is there a crisis in the relationship between art and its public surroundings?**

Jeroen Boomgaard: 'More and more, I believe in autonomous art in public space.'

Jeroen Boomgaard: Crisis? That is a necessary condition for art! Adorno says that art, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, has been in crisis, and that that is its foundation. Through that, it can fulfil its promise of a better future – without crisis, there can't be a better future. The question is whether it goes in a direction that one can be happy with. Does it provide a counter balance?

*Max Bruinsma: In the context of your lectorate and the Zuidas, the principal question seems to be: is it possible at all, art in a public space which is governed by the interests of private economy? There are those who say: it is impossible, because the basic conditions there are organized in a way that the only thing that can come out of it is an illustration of the capitalist processes which are taking place there anyway.*

Without any doubt, the Zuidas is a place where neoliberal capitalism rules, which is inclined to think everything, not merely in terms of investment and revenue, but also in terms of group interests, group identities and interactivity, in terms of subdivision. My conclusion, also based on Jacques Rancière's theory, is that neoliberalism may seem to reflect an 'every man for himself' position, but that it ultimately falls back on stereotype categories, interest groups and so on. The fundamentally individual, the anomalous, that which cannot be reduced to a collective interest, has in today's society become all but invisible. If you take notice, it is shocking to see how everything in public, political and social debates is about group identities. The basis of the new neoliberal ideology, of the market, is not so much freedom of individual expression, but interactivity, playing along, consuming collectively. It only superficially looks like we are all in an individual cocoon, with our iPods and cell phones, but all of these technical means, which seem to substantiate our individuality, are there to continually maintain a form of group communication – the contact between like minds.

*The ultimate village mentality: us, locals, versus them outsiders . . .*

Yes, that atmosphere of inclusion and exclusion . . . That is not a favourable condition for autonomous art. There should remain an area which has not been subdivided into separate interests, an area that can remain somewhat contested – public, therefore, because it *is* contested. I believe that here, on the Zuidas, we shouldn't totally rely on grand-scale projects. I think you can circumvent the iron laws of investment and return by

organizing things that attract only ten people.

*The original idea behind upgrading this large-scale area seemed to be rather more grandiose . . . One could imagine mega-sculptures standing in the shadow of mega-buildings . . .*

In my view, the Virtual Museum Zuidas operates quite serenely in this matter. They do not put their money on mega-sculptures. And I thought the design Jennifer Tee made, an artwork that is now being debated, was wonderful, if only for its title: *Boundless Desire*. I like that, because on the one hand it suggests an ironic commentary on the ambition of the area, but at the same time it indicates what is missing there. Not desire itself is missing – it is present, but it's a calculated desire. Tee, however, is concerned with the incalculable, the unpredictable, the insatiable desire. Her proposal introduces a utopian dimension into a space where it is lacking. Yes, some may say that it is being realized there, but a realized utopia is banal. That is why I like this idea of boundlessness so much, there. Groups don't have boundless desires. Collective desires don't have that idea of infinity – they want to be fulfilled. Tee's 'boundless desire' is something which you cannot name, something personal. Making visible what Rancière calls 'individuation', the moment of the anomalous, of that which completely falls outside of group thinking, can be a very powerful image in such an environment. Whether it is an artwork, or an action, or a small cultural institution crying in the wilderness – it would benefit the area. I believe in that.

*In art, however, especially art in public space, there can be seen a growing tendency towards organizing group experiences, in stead of 'individuations' . . .*

Yes, now that doesn't mean that I think art should be about the expression of self, about solipsistic works by artists who only speak about themselves. That doesn't interest me much. What interests me is the devious view of the world, and that is by definition personal. The problem with organizing group activities in more or less socially inspired artworks is precisely that they fit seamlessly into current practice. But there are certainly opportunities for a kind of infiltration with a completely different culture than that which is mentioned in the plans. A cultural infiltration by temporary things and workshops – simply talking about the area as cultural area. It is also an ideological confrontation . . .

*Confrontation insofar that the space in which this should take place has principally been filled in beforehand, in the ideological and institutional sense, as you already suggested in your first report on the Zuidas . . .*

That is absolutely true. Which does not mean that therefore all space has been taken or been filled in. One of the interesting aspects of neoliberal power, particularly in the Netherlands, is that it partly denies itself. That is a very Dutch thing. There exist all kinds of gaps and blanks, interstitial spaces, where one can indeed do things. Where smart artists and designers can make things one wouldn't expect.

*Well, and when they do, it ends up being discarded. The new supervisor of Urban Development of the Zuidas, Bob van Reeth, has rejected Jennifer Tee's plan without discussion, after it was commissioned by his colleague, supervisor of Art Simon den Hartog, and after it had been accepted by all parties involved. Doesn't that demonstrate that a powerful figure in this process is stronger than all good intentions about collaboratively developing art and real estate?*

It also demonstrates that the whole concept of the area has been a rather elitist affair from the beginning. The concern for art is rather relative and marginal in this kind of projects. The art has simply been swept away in the gesture of someone who cleaned up his predecessor's desk. I can imagine that the supervisor of Art is furious about that, and rightly so, but you do have to see it in perspective.

*What does that say about the reliability of such environments? Of the institutions which devote so many nice phrases – and a seemingly reliable institutional infrastructure – to safeguarding the role of art in this area?*

I have never believed in the reliability of this environment. The story that real estate developers would be seriously interested in good art in public space – sorry, but that is complete rubbish. You can only confront this arena from the standpoint of conflict, of crisis, yes. The municipal government should be more aware of that, and realize that they have relinquished control of that area when it comes to public space. Because, even in a public-private partnership construction, public space still remains the responsibility of the City of Amsterdam. Since we are not talking about a completely privatized area, the city should claim a decisive role in arranging public space in that area. In this case, the municipality is not taking its responsibility. Again, this has to do with the wavering character of public power in the Netherlands, which asserts its presence by being absent. Like: we should all work together, we exert power by offering space, our power is your space. That's all nice and democratic, but the opposite holds true too: defining public space as a realm where a higher power, which rises above private interests, calls the shots.

In so many large urban developments one sees that municipalities have effectively given over power to the developers, which in their turn bend things to their will, not in terms of responsibility, but in terms of power and profitability. I think that is the ruin of public government. Jennifer Tee's example is revealing in this respect. It all hinges on the idea of responsibility. The government may be dependent on the market for financing, but it can state its conditions. Conditions which you can warrant with procedures. And if public government doesn't secure and maintain such procedures, then it is spineless.

*You are an intimate observer of the advancement of art in the Zuidas ... Do you have any influence on what takes place there?*

According to the Virtual Museum Zuidas I'm aloud to 'provoke'. So I'm not just an observer, but I try to be an 'actor' in that I invite artists and designers to formulate their observations on the Zuidas in the book I'm preparing at the moment, *High-Rise and Common Ground - Art and the Amsterdam Zuidas Area*.<sup>3</sup> That is, if you will, a cultural intervention on the Zuidas in the form of a book. 'Speaking about it' is a way of appropriating an area. But as far as my influence is concerned ... The Virtual Museum's clout is already small, mine is minuscule.

*What is your analysis of the process you witnessed the past five years?*

I have grown more pessimistic about the institutional possibilities of art in public space, but more optimistic when it comes to the potential of nonconforming voices. What I can do is provide elements which can play a role in reflection. There are these residences at Platform 21 in which the lectorate partakes, together with Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam. Bik Van der Pol are there now. I'm curious to see what their vision on the Zuidas is. They often provoke an interesting reversal of the conditions at play in certain environments. That incorporates a reflective level that intrigues me. Interventions by artists like Bik Van der Pol can help in better understanding that rather complicated area, or see it from a different angle.

*What is so fascinating about this area for you, as scientific researcher of the arts?*

I'm not a scientist in the strict sense – I'm intensely focused on current issues and my main interest is the social functioning of art. The field of art in public space interests me because of all the paradoxes it contains. I am quite critical towards art which employs social processes, but that does not mean that you shouldn't think about that. Not just about the quality of the art, but about the quality of the processes involved as well. There are always the same basic questions: Who wants it? For whom is it intended? What's going on? An artist should realize that he functions within public space, and thus within various agendas. His role has changed considerably over the past decade and a half. But meanwhile I more and more believe in the potential of autonomous artworks in public space – more than I used to. I said it before, in an article in *Open*: I believe in a radical autonomous art, which is aware of its own position.<sup>4</sup> Of course you cannot just do as you please. But art in public space always entails an unsolicited, and sometimes unwanted, confrontation with art.

*Art in public space has a different rapport with its surroundings than art in the 'neutral' environment of the gallery ...*

Well, insofar that the viewer, who one would call a 'visitor' in the context of a gallery, is much more a 'user' in public space. Artists should be aware of that. Still, a good artist will always make something, also in public space, which may appeal to the user, but which in a sense shuts him out as well. A successful artwork in public space excludes any thought of usage – that is its autonomy. It resists instrumentalization. It can be a counterforce, and I believe that force is necessary. Simply because society needs to go back to another, less cliché, idea of the individual, which now dissolves into collective models. A bit of anarchy doesn't hurt, you know ...

*The Virtual Museum Zuidas is an institution between art, the city and real estate developers. Not a good point of departure for anarchy.*

It's stuck. I applaud their efforts – as an institution – to nail things down. At the same time, its organizers are involved in temporary projects and events, in occupying spaces ... they have remained quite flexible. In my view, they could speak out in public more often in order to denounce things that are not right. If Jennifer Tee's work is not realized, they should certainly do that, because in that case they are being steamrolled. But as far as I'm concerned, the role of the Virtual Museum has not ended yet. Considering how slow these processes go, how much effort it takes to develop this whole area, they should absolutely be given the chance to develop something for the long run. For me, it's important that in this vast project there is an organization that continually says: So what about culture? What about art? What culture do you mean? What about it? That is crucial. Otherwise you'll end up with a square with a monument in the centre and that's it. That's Bob van Reeth's idea. That is not the idea of the Virtual Museum Zuidas. That is why it's good they are there.

Tom van Gestel: 'Art is not meant to dance to someone-else's tune.'

I don't know about that crisis thing. I do know there are problems when it comes to realizing good art projects in public space – I prefer to call them projects rather than artworks. You can question the notion of 'public' in art in public space. It has been privatized in two ways. In the first place, it has been privatized institutionally, because there is less and less space in public hands. And it is increasingly becoming a controlled space – you feel rather less comfortable when there are a bunch of cameras pointed at you. And secondly, public space has become more private in that people behave differently in public. Everyone carries a cell phone, which means when you are on the street, you are bound to hear what someone's going to have for dinner tonight. I still find that an awkward

experience, this confrontation with someone else's private sphere. In any case, the character of public space has changed dramatically. But maybe that is less a crisis than a challenge. You know it's a well-known fact that art flourishes in times of crisis.

*So you are in agreement with Jeroen Boomgaard, who quotes Adorno in saying that 'crisis is a fundamental condition of art'. No shine without friction.*

Exactly. But it has become more complicated to realize good projects. That is not just caused by the fact that public space has become more controlled, but also because less and less people take responsibility for it. Gijs van Oenen wrote a few good things about that in his article for *Open*, on fear and security.<sup>5</sup> He talks about a kind of 'interpassivity', meaning that everyone thinks that things should change, but refuses to take responsibility. The result is that you have to spend disproportionate amounts of time when organizing projects.

*Isn't that also due to the kind of projects artists want to realize? Artists increasingly want to organize collective experiences, bring people together. The artist as a kind of social therapist...*

That has really become a topic. There is indeed an increase in projects which expect the user of public space to participate. And the user does not always comply. It also has to do with individualization – there is less community spirit. I have strongly felt that with certain attempts of 'Beyond, Leidsche Rijn' to involve the local population in projects. That is extremely complicated.

We have been developing projects there since 2000 on the basis of a manifestation model. So you introduce a programme by means of a manifestation and then the manifestation never stops. You start up a development. I find that interesting, I don't like events that open and close on specific dates. That's slightly weird – there should be something going on. You look where the boundaries are, within which you can still speak of art and of what artists can manage. If you succeed, the manifestation will provide a wealth of material you can continue with. 'Parasite Paradise', for instance, was a collection of strange objects that were being used and still managed to tilt your view of reality. A kind of reconstructed village, that had everything that Leidsche Rijn did not have. The somewhat weird title indicates that it was actually about light forms of urbanism and architecture, about temporary urbanism.

*A slightly anarchistic approach?*

Yes, and it was closely connected to a critique on the iron laws of urban planning. In the context of an urban development plan like Utrecht's expansion, you are stuck with market parties. And market parties are not going to build shopping centres when there are no people and no roads. So there is an extended period of time when nothing happens in such a new district. Also, these parties aren't happy when you do develop an infrastructure of facilities in such an area, since that can compete with existing or planned facilities. They are afraid that it can't be controlled and that a future shopping mall will be undermined by a kind of tolerance policy that allows Turkish bakers and butchers to set up shop in their own homes. The idea of 'Parasite Paradise' was to show that there's an alternative. Not in order to solve problems, or to be genuinely facilitating, but to break through standard ideas and take tolerance as a norm. That was the game, the atmosphere, more or less.

*Was it also meant to show the kind of creativity that is unleashed when real estate developers and the municipality don't mingle in the affairs of citizens?*

Yes, exactly. There was a high degree of coincidence – creating conditions without knowing exactly what the outcome would be. There was Joep van Lieshout's hotel, Kevin van Braak's camping flat, a theatre made of crates by Wolfgang Winter and Berthold

Hörbelt, an architectural office, 2012 Architecten, that worked *in situ* with recycled materials for a few months, an artists in residence programme with Bik van der Pol, a huge restaurant by Maurer United Architects that could easily seat 200 people. All in all a nice collection of strange objects, but all meant to be used, to be programmed. So we had an art-cook programme for which Maxime Ansiau developed a mobile kitchen set, a theatre programme, and so forth. In short, there were things going on. But it still had to be conceived and work as an art programme. Therefore it was in my view crucial to have Vito Acconci's Mobile Linear City there; a completely useless thing, but still an image of a society in which all that matters is technology and usability. So, more about meaning than about use. I wanted to show that balance and that difference – between functionality and meaning. On the other hand it shouldn't be about sacred objects; the essence of Parasites was that it should be used as well.

*Which brings us back to the question of the boundaries of art ...*

For me, it's essential that an artwork always provides a different view to reality. It should evoke an experience that allows you to see everyday life in a different light. It doesn't solve any problem, but provokes the question: 'Why not, really?' So it is not about instrumentalization, about problem solving. That's the limit for me. When Sjaak Langenberg imagines a project for the Mastenbroek Polder in which he pretends that he and a farmer are real estate developers – and proposes that the farmer is going to develop a housing project on his own land himself, instead of the realtors, in which case the farmer would have to leave – then it's obvious that Langenberg will not actually do that. That's where the artist's responsibility stops. He has provided a different view to reality and it is up to others to do something with that, or not. Perhaps the farmer will think: I won't sell my land, I won't go along with this!

*That is an almost social-democratic idea of art: fostering the citizen's independence ...*

Yes, by indicating that you don't have to accept everything you see around you as a matter of fact. When you read a good book, the same happens.

*It's an ideology you also encounter in policies of art in public space: integrate the development of art and urban renewal and expansion, as a means to better involve citizens. In this context, the forces to instrumentalize art are quite strong ...*

The Zuidas is a typical example of that, and one that I was not eager to become involved in. It is a weird force field that deals with square meters and real estate, in which art can easily end up in a subordinate position. That big TV screen in front of the new railway station – the one thing I was involved in – is an attempt to do something relatively uncensored in that environment. You may hope that a lawyer from one of the adjacent firms, when he crosses the square and sees that screen, thinks: wow, what's going on there? But apart from that, I think that the conditions for good art in the public space of the Zuidas are not perfect. In this kind of environment, before you know it, it's all about representation. A place can be intrinsically interesting for art, but this one is not. If you look at all those buildings on the Zuidas, you notice one thing: that they all dissociate themselves from their environment, they create distance. Even that nice, funny thing by Meyer en Van Schooten, the shoe-like ING-bank headquarters, as a building has no meaning for its surroundings. It doesn't provoke behaviour, it just sits there. You can like it or not, and that's it. Therefore, I think it is hard to develop a good art programme on the Zuidas. Look at the exhibition of sculptures that is going on there now: principally, there are good artists involved with good artworks, but they are all very much on their own, a bit sad. They emanate an intense longing for the place they originated from. They don't feel at home there ...

*A 'boundless desire', to use the title of Jennifer Tee's proposal ...*

Ha, yes! If you think about it, I suppose the Virtual Museum should have been organized differently. In Leidsche Rijn, we had a sharp scenario, which was accepted by various partners who were then tied to a plan with which they were not allowed to interfere in detail. But they did share the responsibility for its realization. Of course, in the long run that becomes harder and harder to maintain, but it did make things possible that could not have been done, had this deal not been made. It doesn't just happen, even if there's an art supervisor who can co-develop a programme. The forces there are simply too strong for a programme that has no fixed status within the whole ...

*Wasn't the art supervisor explicitly intended to give the art programme that kind of status?*

I respect Simon den Hartog's and the Virtual Museum Zuidas's attempts, but in my view they have not entirely succeeded. I still hope that some good things will come out of it, and of course I'm happy with that video screen, but the thing is, with projects that don't succeed, like Mark Manders', or Jennifer Tee's, of which we don't know if it will be realized ... it is not only the Zuidas that suffers from this kind of business - we suffer the consequences as well. Artists who have experienced that, having made a proposal that has been accepted and that seemed ready to go, until a party in the process suddenly changed their mind, will think twice before they ever let themselves get involved again. These are often not the worst artists and we need them. But they don't think about it, that is a dire effect. As far as this is concerned, the gloves could come off more often.

You are often in situations in which you think: I didn't trust them from the start, and it turns out I'm right, too. Why on earth did I get into this in the first place? Well, because a situation fitted the idea, because you thought something should happen. And then you fight the windmills, like some sort of Don Quixote. But, hey, there are things that succeed, surprisingly sometimes, but they do. An example is a project we are currently working on in a small community, Sint-Oedenrode, where we were requested to advise on making monumental markings of a route along seven old castles or manor houses, or what's left of them now. Three of them are still recognizable, but the others have disappeared, although their locations are known. In itself, that was not such an interesting question: seven artistic markings, so these seven houses would exist again. So you start pondering what the real origin of that village is, and that is Saint Oda, the daughter of a Scottish king who travelled to Liege in the eighth century to be cured of her blindness, and returning homeward decided to settle down as a hermit in the village which is now named after her, Sint-Oedenrode. This doesn't have to be true, but it is something artists can deal with. Something between fiction and fact. I asked landscape architect Paul Roncken, who came up with an 'architectural spatial framework' in which he showed how the layout of that village, including its seven manor houses, has been determined by history. But he also started imagining. Sint-Oedenrode could have been Holland's Capital city if only the bishop of so-and-so or the duke of here-to-there had done or not done this or that. That spawned a vast project, which far surpassed the imagination of the people who originally came to us with the simple question of monumental markings. And it led to an approach that has subsequently been applied to the A 50 highway between Oss and Eindhoven. New Arcadian routes are now being created, which link to existing hiking paths on which wondrous things are happening ...

*A new local mythology is designed ...*

Exactly. And it takes a while before people realize that art can also be a completely different source of inspiration. That suddenly, a few weeks ago, there are people walking through that village, blindfolded and with earphones, who follow the journey of the blind Saint Oda. You are adding stories to what already goes around. You should be aware of that when you develop a project: not so much what the place is like, but what the situation

is like. And can you work with that, within an art context? Are there topics there, which I can associate with what's happening in art?

*In the situation you outline, your role is that of an editor...*

Yes, sometimes it works like that. You research possible themes and look for artists whom you think might be interested in them. But I have hardly any influence on what comes out of that, on the work itself. If that were the case, they would simply fill in my plan, and that's not the idea. Artists should never fulfil expectations.

*You wrote in an earlier article in Open: 'More and more, artists feel the need to break through their isolation and play down their ego. They feel involved and are genuinely interested in the stories of individuals. They function as mediator between the settled, civilized, thriving, careless, self-centred and uncritical society and its reverse side.'*<sup>6</sup> *The artists as mediator... Do you, too, see a shift from artists making monumental things to artists that design processes?*

That's what we are talking about in the new policy plan for SKOR. It's not something you make up; there are developments, which take place and you want to facilitate them as they happen. As an institution, we have a bias that changes with time, and should change too, if we pretend that we are setting an example, which is what we are officially supposed to do. You sense what is going on in the arts in terms of practical approaches and fields of interest. And in certain situations you see possibilities for facilitating these approaches. In that sense you foster art. Of course, this is done on the basis of our own analysis of what is interesting or not. You want to find out things: Is it true? Is it really interesting what is being said about certain new directions in art? Okay, well let's see it.

*What changes do you see in government policies concerning the arts?*

To be honest, I have never cared much about that. You feel that there are developments in the arts and in policies, and you react to them. If you look at the instructions from the powers that be, from the Ministry of Culture, for instance, then it's clear that these too are not without background. They too receive signals from society. Ideally, we are ahead of these. Take something like 'community art'. That is something which is stimulated by a government that is politically interested in social cohesion. A number of works in 'Beyond, Leidsche Rijn', could be described as 'community art', but they have never been initiated within that framework. A much more important framework for us was to research forms of urbanism – to me that is as topical, if not more topical. If you look at Parasite Paradise as the hardware – we were talking about building there – then we dealt with what I call 'life, love and death' in the exhibition 'Pursuit of Happiness'. You can see a community art aspect in that; we wanted to reach out to the community. I still think it was a great exhibition, but it failed in its intentions. We were really interested in the feelings of the local population – the software, so to speak – more than in building and habitation. We have experienced how difficult that is – hardly anybody from the neighbourhood visited the show. And the attempts at breaking out of the exhibition area failed. We wanted to extend our tentacles into the neighbourhood. Esra Ersen, for instance, wanted to give a voice to the local gang kids – you see, it's becoming a real neighbourhood: they have gangs. The idea was to make black leather jackets with their statements printed on the back. And then the kids would roam the neighbourhood dressed in these jackets, after which a set of the same jackets would be displayed in the exhibition. With that, a relation is constructed between the show and the neighbourhood. But three days before the opening these kids flatly refused to wear them – they would not wear those fag jackets, over their dead bodies! Ersen had made an image of these kids that didn't fit them. These boys had no intention at all of looking like a kind of West Side Story gang. So I made them a proposal: if we can exhibit the jackets as they are, with your statements on them, I'll give each of you 120 euros and you can go and buy jackets you consider cool. Deal! On Saturday the

exhibition opens and on Sunday the jacks are gone. 'Artwork Stolen', the local newspaper reports the next day. So I'm called by the press and asked how shocked I am. I say I'm not shocked at all – we wanted social interaction, didn't we? Well then! Whether it was a rivalling gang that took the jackets or the boys themselves is irrelevant. I thought it was a great socially engaged project!

**Max Bruinsma** is a freelance design and art critic, curator and editorial designer. He is the former editor of *Items* design magazine and of *Eye, The International Review of Graphic Design* in London. Bruinsma has lectured on contemporary visual culture, graphic and media design throughout the world. In 2005, he received the Pierre Bayle Prize for Design Criticism.

## Footnotes

1. For more information on the lectorate Art in Public Space, see: [www.lkpr.nl](http://www.lkpr.nl). For more information on the Virtual Museum Zuidas, see: [www.virtueel-museum.nl](http://www.virtueel-museum.nl).
2. skor is the national organization in the Netherlands that realizes art projects in the public domain. See: [www.skor.nl](http://www.skor.nl). For more information on Beyond Leidsche Rijn, see: [www.beyondutrecht.nl](http://www.beyondutrecht.nl).
3. Jeroen Boomgaard (ed.), *High-Rise and Common Ground. Art and the Amsterdam Zuidas Area* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008).
4. Jeroen Boomgaard, 'Radical autonomy. Art in times of process management', *Open, Cahier on art and the public domain*, no.10 (In)tolerance (Rotterdam / Amsterdam: NAI Publishers / skor. 2006).
5. Gijs van Oenen, 'Het nieuwe veiligdom. De interpassieve transformatie van de publieke sfeer', *Open, Cahier on art and the public domain*, no. 6 (In)security (Rotterdam / Amsterdam: NAI Publishers / skor. 2004).
6. Tom van Gestel, 'Kunst in de vergeethoek', *Open, Cahier on art and the public domain*, no. 3 Kunst in psychogeriatriche verpleeghuizen (Amsterdam: skor in collaboration with Artimo, 2002).

## Tags

Art Discourse, Public Domain, Public Space, Urban Space

This text was downloaded on February 17, 2026 from  
*Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain*  
[www.onlineopen.org/autonomous-community-art-in-private-public-space](http://www.onlineopen.org/autonomous-community-art-in-private-public-space)