General

Highrise
Common Ground. Art and the Amsterdam Zuidas Area

Ilse van Rijn

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Jeroen Boomgaard (ed.), *Highrise – Common Ground. Art and the Amsterdam Zuidas Area,* Amsterdam, Valiz, 2008, ISBN 9789078088189, 384 pages

'Art – Has it tough all over' says Barbara Visser in her fictitious 'Zuidas ABC' in the recently published *Highrise – Common Ground: Art and the Amsterdam Zuidas Area* Visser's definition is a lamentation that, after reading *Highrise – Common Ground*, proves typical of the genesis of the art projects along the former 'fringe of green between the Amstel and the Schinkel'.

The construction of the Zuidas, an urban expansion zone for a commercial centre on the south side of Amsterdam that is scheduled to be completed in 2030, has reached a crucial phase, says Jeroen Boomgaard, professor of Art and Public Space at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and editor of the book. He asserts that it is now not only possible to assess the future success of the Zuidas, but also to determine the role that art might play in it. Is this moment not somewhat premature? In the book, each of the artists involved in the Zuidas expresses scepticism about the virtually impossible task of creating a sketch design for a place that does not yet exist. They resort to scenarios (sometimes of doom) and futuristic models. To theorists, on the contrary, the partly virtual space that the Zuidas still is for the moment offers the opportunity to explore their ideas 'without inhibition'. The different voices come together in *Highrise – Common Ground*.

The contradictory interests of the parties involved in the Zuidas result in visible incoherence – on that point virtually all authors are in agreement. The Zuidas is progress turned into design, within which art is a staged accident (Visser), a computer-generated model for the layout of a space (Daniel van der Velden), an artificial structure (Joost Zonneveld) in which art is the destabilizing factor, or the instinctive link with everyday life that the master plan lacks (Roemer van Toorn). Anthropologist and journalist Joost Zonneveld, for example, is perplexed that the varied functions the Zuidas is supposed to accommodate have been thought about, but not its busting vitality. The commercial enterprises are located next to knowledge centres and cultural institutions, but the planners of the Zuidas have not considered the diversity of people responsible for what is being labelled a city centre. Publicly subsidized housing, for instance, is almost entirely absent. A city grows in an organic and dynamic way; it cannot be constructed in advance. If changes are to avoid turning into failures in the long run, they must neither be disassociated from the social context nor mixed up with politics, argues Stan Majoor.

Conflicting socioeconomic, political and artistic interests should not be avoided, says the oft-quoted political scientist Chantal Mouffe in another copious text. Mouffe separates the domain of conventional politics (empirical, ontic) from 'the political' (philosophical,

ontological), which she views as a 'common ground', the symbolic space we share. In this her ideas are not necessarily contrary to those of Majoor. Our public space is not neutral, she continues. Opponents (not 'enemies') must acknowledge controversies on the one hand and tame them on the other. This causes a confrontation Mouffe calls 'agonistic' *[www.onlineopen.org/art-and-democracy]*. Only critical art can once more make visible the struggle that the dominant consensus model tends to obscure. Critical art, according to Mouffe, is not staged art ('mise-en-scène'); critical gives shape to controversy ('mise-en-forme'). Political scientist Gerard Drosterij has doubts about Mouffe's 'agonistic' approach. Doesn't the power of art lie in the aesthetic experience it generates in the viewer? To interpret art as politics, as an element of a social network and imbedded in power relations, is antithetical to this.

The fact that Mouffe's 'agonistic approach' is a brilliant but difficult to use instrument is also demonstrated by bavo's questions. Does art not become politics the moment artists take a seat at the negotiations table at an early stage? Is the new alliance between capital and culture not a reason to refuse the commission? Political issues are being foisted onto art. In order to submit this process itself to a critical analysis, art must adopt an intermediate position, for which bavo has coined the term ***extimate***. The cultural actor BAVO *[www.onlineopen.org/how-much-politics-can-art-take]*champions is firmly grounded in the process itself and at the same time is not part of it. This demands the incorruptible position of the artist in relation to his own expertise. Today's artist is an idealist with an uncompromising attitude. Only then can art play a role in a public space that to a large extent has been colonized by the market.

Daniel van der Velden / Logo Parc *[www.onlineopen.org/hybridity-of-the-post-public-space]* deny art any possibility of changing society. Artists are flies and mosquitoes, circling around the head of the elephant that is the Zuidas. 'They can funkify the fringes of the heterotopia (the globally oriented business centre that is the Zuidas, in Van der Velden's words), but that is actually all they can do.' The Zuidas can not be realized in a work of art, says van der Velden, but the Zuidas itself cannot be realized either. The Zuidas can be presented as a non-actualized three-dimensional model that stands between the present and the future, equivalent to the model the project developer uses to vouchsafe the future. Any work of art in the public space that does not openly call the conditions under which it is made into question endorses these very conditions. Is that what Mouffe means by 'critical art'?

The only contributor that unabashedly and enthusiastically characterizes the art projects planned for the Zuidas as part of a fascinating and exciting process is Henk de Vroom. It must have something to do with his position in the commission of the Zuidas Virtual Museum (VMZ). He presents the 'artistic sites' that will link the shops, office buildings and theatres of the Zuidas together as oases where freedom and imagination are inextricably connected with the city. De Vroom's vision has elements of utopia. After the critical viewpoints of the other authors, it is impossible to read his words without cynicism.

The question of the suppressed autonomy of the artist in general and of art in particular, already posed by BAVO, is placed in an art-historical context in a final essay by Jeroen Boomgaard. When art is incorporated into the prevailing order and therefore silenced, it must return to its previously overcome autonomy. It is this very autonomy that enables art to reveal the limits of the system. Only radically autonomous art *[www.onlineopen.org/radical-autonomy]* can reach beyond what has been planned. And therefore expected.

A literally 'unreal' Zuidas seems a meagre starting point for a book. *Highrise – Common Ground* proves the opposite. It is a dynamic, sometimes cheeky and hilarious, not always equally balanced and vulnerable publication. Above all, the book proves to be a democratic consultation with the reader. The future visitor to the Zuidas is invited to take part in the discussion about art in the public space, which he shares, according to Mouffe, with the

authors, artists and theorists, but also with the government and other investors in the Zuidas. The future will tell whether the Zuidas manages to surpass expectations.*Highrise – Common Ground* at least enables one to reflect on it. Definitive answers to the question of the role of art in the public space are not given, but a first step towards a historic discussion about it has been taken.

Ilse van Rijn is a critic and art historian. She is working on her doctoral research, studying 'autonomously produced artists' writings: their operative force, status and role,' collaboratively supported by the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, the Jan van Eyck Academy and the University of Amsterdam / ASCA. She was previously a researcher and adviser at the Jan van Eyck Academy. Currently, she teaches in the Rietveld department of 'image & language.'

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Architecture, Art Discourse, Public Space, Urban Space

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