

The Functioning of Art in the Public Domain

Foreword

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If we go by the number of lectorates (research groups at universities of applied sciences that revolve around specific knowledge domains) in the Netherlands that are currently investigating the role of the arts in the public sphere, it is clear that more attention is being paid to the relation between art and its publics than ever before. The fact that lectorates in particular are being allocated to do this research is a logical consequence of the position they occupy on the interface of theory and practice. Affiliated with practice-oriented educational programmes, they are responsible for setting up and stimulating research that takes actual practice as its starting point. It is therefore only logical that this research primarily focuses on the area where art practice and art criticism step out of their isolation and take on the confrontation with public space.

In this issue of *Open*, the analysis of this confrontation is based on the work of Bruno Latour. Its central idea can be summarized with the concept of 'relationality'. Facts, ideas and artefacts do not exist in isolation, but in webs of relations with other facts, ideas and artefacts. The benefit of this relational thinking is that it enables us to look at things in a new way. In what has become a classic example given by Latour: If we want people to keep to the speed limit in the built-up area, we need speed bumps as well as traffic regulations. The traffic regulation, car, driver and speed bump form a network in which there is no a priori difference between people and things. Within such an 'actor network', a speed bump can do something; namely, cause the driver to step on the break.

We generally consider art in public space from an art-theoretical or sociological point of view, for example the role of the artist in relation to the commissioner and the public; or from an urban planning perspective that centres on the position of the art work in relation to the built environment. However, when we take the relationality of people and things as our starting point, it is possible to investigate art in public space in new ways. What a work of art does is dependent on more than only its intrinsic aesthetic qualities, social constellations or spatial appropriateness. Latour's approach makes a combination of perspectives possible. As a result, we can avoid the oppositions and dualisms that often paralyse the discourse on the arts in the public domain. The role that the art work plays as Thing in the public sphere goes beyond distinctions such as 'applied' or 'autonomous'. In Latour's thinking, these perspectives on the functioning of art are inseparably interrelated. Autonomy can be seen as a condition for engagement, while applicability and instrumental value may be outcomes of the reception of autonomous works of art.

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