Views on Art Training for Art in Public Space

A Round-Table Discussion Chaired by Henk Oosterling

Henk Oosterling

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Publicity and public space have turned out to be urgent sociocultural and political issues in recent decades. Art is pre-eminently a domain that has a bearing on the public sphere. Yet the Netherlands has neither a politically committed practice of art in public space, nor a tradition in that area. This country also lacks an artistic training option that concentrates exclusively on the practice of art in public space and on the social commitment that goes along with it. Apparently no need is seen for such a course within higher art education; or perhaps there is an insufficiency of expertise for anticipating the changing, compelling contexts that affect today's art practice. The editors and the guest editors of *Open* 8 invited a number of 'professionals' to exchange some ideas on higher art education with regard to art in public space. The participants in the private round-table discussion, chaired by philosopher Henk Oosterling, were as follows: Jeanne van Heeswijk, artist working in public space; Henk Slager, head of the Utrecht Graduate School of Visual Art and Design; Jouke Kleerebezem, artist and advising researcher at the artists' workplace Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht; Jan van Grunsven, artist and former coordinator of the OK5 / department of Art and Public Space, ArtEZ, Arnhem.

Below are reproduced some fragments of an exploratory discussion on the possibility or impossibility of creating a specialized training course, and on the legitimation and social commitment of artistic practice in public space.

Henk Oosterling: Considerable changes are presently taking place both in public space and in art and artistic training. The pressure of various social, political and economic developments is forcing these fields to reassess their legitimacy and to redefine their positions with regard to one another. What does this imply for the artistic training options for artists who wish to work in public space? Can artists indeed be trained to work in public space? If so, what infrastructural conditions must training courses of this kind satisfy? And, now that Dutch higher and academic education has adopted the bachelor / master system, what institutional setting is appropriate for that training?[1]

Jan van Grunsven: Yes, artists can be trained to work in public space, although this does imply a fundamentally different way of thinking about artistic practice. In 1997 I was asked by the Arnhem Hogeschool voor de Kunsten, now part of ArtEZ, to think about a 'restart' of

the Arnhem School. [2] You could say that the socially involved kind of artistic practice the Arnhem School once aspired to had gradually turned into a symbolic practice, reduced to a question of mere form. I saw no benefit in just prolonging an aesthetic doctrine. To me, the development of art in any case no longer emanated from art itself but from art's capacity to react to the context in which it operates. The autonomous proposition that was universally accepted in thinking about art in that period seemed to me would inevitably migrate towards an applied alternative. That observation encapsulates the main essence of what I then proposed for the educational course at Arnhem, called ok5 / art and public space. It implies after all a principally different formulation not only of the basic departure point of art in public space, but also of its effects, the visibility of its outcome. The kind of practice I had in mind no longer puts the primary stress on individual self expression; it does not begin with endless introspection into the artist's personal history with the aim of trying to amplify or adjust that history. This practice of 'art in public space' places the world outside art at the centre of its concerns. Public space is its most important point of reference and field of action. This way of artistic practice regards the problematic autonomy of visual art as secondary to the cultural issues that concern society; it seeks its *raison d'être* explicitly in the context within which it functions. That entire *Umfeld* has to be explored. After all, you have to ask yourself what it all means for the definition of the design task. I defined that *Umfeld* at the time as the 'hardware, software and orgware of the design task', and in that light I made a case for the development of specific tools and a design-oriented strategy. The fact is that when we speak of the practice of art – that is, the practice with regard to commissioned work – we are also concerned with questions such as those of internal and external expertise, of the commissioning client and of decision procedures. What is your strategy, and what are your tactics? What frame of reference do you need for organizing feedback on the results you have achieved? My aspiration with ok5 was to position the practice of art in public space much more in the centre of things; not as an aloof discipline but as one expressly engaging in dialogue with the context and with other disciplines. Professional art education had and still has accumulated very little experience in taking an approach of this kind. There is an excessive fixation on single disciplines. I don't believe you have to train first as an artist and only then seek your 'field of applicability' in public space. Public space is not just some or other genre but a specific, complex discipline, and, if you wish to consider it in connection with artistic training courses, in my view you have to develop things as an integral whole. It isn't a question of one thing or another, but of both one and the other. Nor is it simply a question of starting a bachelor course as an artist in public space. When you start on a course of education for art in public space, you have to start entirely from scratch, at a basic level and in direct dialogue with the area of application. That is where the questions and where the tasks lie waiting.

On the grounds of the experiences I had with ok5, I was asked to write a curriculum plan for an educational department of 'art in public space' at post-HBO (roughly, postgraduate) level. I devised the plan in communication with two partner institutes in the same region, the Arnhem Academy of Architecture (Academie van Bouwkunst) and the EMILA (the European Master of Landscape Architecture) school in Velp. The city of Arnhem acted as a fourth partner in the construct, especially for determining the design task. The intention was to share knowledge on a systematic basis, with a strong focus on interdisciplinary cooperation as a standard part of everyone's training curriculum; a setup that would be unique in the Netherlands. Technical considerations of financing resulted however in the Academy in Enschede being asked to implement this plan. The fact that the substantive focus of that institution conflicted with the intentions behind the curriculum plan did not stand in the way of the governing board's decision to place the affair in the hands of Enschede. What might have become a unique educational construction was thus scrapped, and the preference went to something that could have been developed just about anywhere.

As to the concrete study curriculum, it consisted of a design-oriented component, a visual

art component and a theory component. The curriculum was compiled in close cooperation with groups such as Crimson and Schie 2.0 in Rotterdam, and resulted in the introduction of what is termed design-oriented research. This is an approach rooted in the thought that research can deliver such valuable information that communicating its results sufficiently justifies the making of a design. The design strategy and tactics that directly follow from the approach were taught by Lucas Verwey (Schie 2.0). Jorinde Seijdel taught media theory and Herman Verkerk taught 'design and analysis' in an approach derived from Delft University of Technology.

Something I missed in the course structure was some serious thought about the skills necessary for a design process of this kind, which includes not merely the capacity to prepare an architectural drawing and model, to interpret the idea to scale, but also skills in negotiation. There were also classes on art appreciation, art history, architectural history and architectural theory. We also worked with a Practice Agency, through which students could gain experience on assignments in real practice from real clients, such as the Municipality of Haarlemmermeer in connection with the new high-speed rail line, the Ministry of LNV (Agriculture, Nature Development and Fisheries) and the Gelredome stadium. There was also the collaboration with the EMILA and the Academy of Architecture, in which context we carried out a number of studies over 3 years under the name 'Atelier 4', looking for example into the Schuytgraaf VINEX location and the post-war Presikhaaf estate, both in Arnhem. This enabled students to participate in an exchange of ideas and to test their acquired knowledge against current practice. This took place either with an external client (quite a different matter from receiving an assignment from a teacher) or as part of an exchange with students from the other disciplines, architecture and landscape architecture.

A Public Domain Department

Jeanne van Heeswijk: I don't know if a course of training for art in public space really ought to be taught as a separate discipline at an art academy. You rapidly get caught up in the confused dichotomy of autonomous and applied art. I would situate a course of this kind within a larger 'Public Domain' Department. And I wonder whether such a department ought to be part of a school of art. I could imagine it being part of the course at an Academy of Architecture, for example. In that kind of department, a student should be able to get involved in developing a specific, visual perspective on public space. My view is that you should first be trained as an artist or architect, and only then move on to a Public Domain Department: something like a postgraduate or master-level course, with a multidisciplinary structure, following on from a monodisciplinary prior study. In other words, it would allow you to specialize in working in public space equally well as an artist or as an architect. The existence of a course of that kind would help prevent the rise of a generation of artists who seriously believe they can conduct a public process merely by inviting everyone for a cup of coffee, because they have never really grasped the concepts of publicity, of autonomy or of compromise.

To me, the capacity to pose aesthetic questions with regard to the public domain is one of the most important qualities, and is essential for working in public space. It's a quality that's inherent to being an artist. The capacity for posing aesthetic questions is something we ought to try to instil at art schools. This skill can be put to use in many different processes. As to which process, it's an area where you can pick and choose. That's why I would prefer not to position the 'public domain' business within an art academy, nor in a professorial chair, but in there with the hardware, with architecture and urban design.

My practical experience as an artist leads me to believe that the curriculum of a Public Domain Department ought to include at least sociological research, social geography and social communication. When working public space it is after all a matter of identifying the different groups present in that space, and of increasing the visibility of the forces that

prevail there. You have to develop special tools for that purpose, tools that enable an artist to respond visually to the space.

'Despecialization'

Henk Slager: Thinking about making art in public space is a second option for many artists. After all, exhibiting work in prestigious museums and public galleries takes pride of place. It seems this is precisely why the Netherlands has never felt the need to have a specialized training course in art in public space. I carried out a study into the functioning of the art academy, in response to a book by Ute Meta Bauer (Education, Information, Entertainment, 2001). The outcome was that I made a number of proposals for different forms an art education could take in practice, and how it could be made to mesh with social developments. I then took a close look at a number of Dutch art academies and concluded that they are still dominated by art-historical thinking. The training is given largely by people in their fifties, who think about art and about art-historical concepts in traditional terms, with the result that the frame of reference of art education is almost unquestioningly museum-oriented. As long as that discourse still holds sway, people are forced think in terms of museum-like contexts, forms of presentation, etcetera. So a different discourse needs to be introduced into the art academies if they are to have any chance of creating a different climate and a different form of artistic professional practice.

The present reformulation prompted by the introduction of the bachelor-master structure should in my view in no way concern itself with developing new specialisms such as art in public space. On the contrary, it appears to be time to despecialize the graduate programme, for this is a necessary consequence of the complexity of today's society. Along with this there should be an increasingly transmedia and transdisciplinary research attitude. A training as an artistic researcher, as is offered by the recently started ma Fine Art programme of the Utrecht Graduate School of Visual Art and Design (Mahku), is concerned with this kind of artistic practice: an artist who embraces both exhibition projects and commissioned work in public space, as two research tracks that are in principle of equal validity. The course puts the student in a position to focus on art in public space when desired, and it does so by giving him or her an opportunity to compile an individual research programme which contains components of both the Fine ArtMA and the Design MA courses; components which address relevant issues, such as cultural / critical studies, transmedia research, urban interior design and an individual research project in public space.

I consider that the course on offer here is an ideal form of training towards the public practice of art. Moreover, the perspective of artistic research provides exactly the perspective needed to seek a balance between developing a discourse and engaging in individual research in the public domain. This individual research will thus never result in a kind of legitimizing, static or definitive discourse production, such as that of art history, but for the sake of the desired dynamic it will endeavour to maintain a balanced interaction between researching practice and positioning reflection. This kind of despecialization can only exist within in a postgraduate course. In other words, I consider it necessary to have a monodisciplinary, mediumbased curriculum for the first higher educational phase, and to engage in transdisciplinary experiments only in the second, postgraduate, phase.

The Consciousness of a Disciplinary Tradition

Jouke Kleerebezem: I am very much attached to the label of an artist. I do not believe you first have to go through a monodisciplinary training and only then get involved with public space. Whether you're an artist, an architect or a designer is something you will discover in the course of time. As to taking a multidisciplinary approach, there is a lack of clear examples. What form, for example, should the transition from a monodisciplinary to a multidisciplinary context take? There are of course specific disciplinary skills you have to acquire, but the consciousness of a disciplinary tradition is of primary importance. You have to learn to relate to a tradition, to speak the language of a discipline. That can set a direction for the way you relate to things as an artist, and thus also for the way you relate to public space. It is not so much a matter of having a 'history': tradition also means the consciousness of belonging to a specific group with specific interests.

The central question in current art education is, in the context of a postmonumental information culture, what principles, disciplines and skills must we acquire in order to generate meaning through art and design *[www.onlineopen.org/the-post-monumental-image]*? Learning is a practice of study and research that operates within a broader social activity, and which must remain somewhat aloof from that activity in both technical and conceptual respects, although without totally isolating itself. The 'laboratory', the 'library', the 'studio' and the 'stage' are places which, under refined and carefully controlled conditions, are supposed to optimize the technical parameters and the human resources for conducting an individual artistic practice. One of the main objectives in this area is to establish channels through which the knowledge acquired is testable in relation to other social activities. The relation between the knowledge institute and its social context needs to be redefined for art education as much as it does for other disciplines. The cultural, economic and epistemological value of art-specific and design-specific knowledge is at present drastically underestimated.

The knowledge generated in the realm of art and design is not primarily theoretical in character. It is a living knowledge, which takes shape within a changing society. This knowledge must never be made subservient to any other societal aspiration, but has to develop meaning from the starting point of its unique position, tradition and possibilities, all of which are unreservedly 'social' in nature. Especially now that there is a stress on the investigation of new knowledge systems, care must be taken that art and design do not lose themselves in other social practices which are trying polish up their image. Art nor design can be a quick fix.

I nurture a great suspicion of 'applied art', and almost as great a suspicion of art institutes. The Jan van Eyck Academy where I am now engaged is a knowledge institute, not an educational institute. The major handicap affecting art and other education is the shortage of knowledge among a corps of lecturers who underwent a now long obsolete form of training in the 1960s to 1980s. It is for this reason that in my view a model should not be sought in teaching / learning, but in disciplinewide, communal knowledge acquisition, in which the differences of social experience among different 'learners' must work to the advantage of all generations. A related pitfall is that a knowledge gap is also evident in other societal disciplines and institutions, and this manifests itself as misguided measures, short-term solutions, poorly planned allocations of resources and opportunities, faulty priorities and, to add insult to injury, an inappropriate formulation of the questions to be addressed by the artistic disciplines in their training courses and practices. The challenge facing art and design is to be found, time and time again, in cultural production itself.

Public space has long ceased to be public space in the conventional sense. We come up against a web of consultation and decision structures, of politics, project developers, local residents, subsidy applications, committees and so on. An artist who works in public space is also faced with privatization and deregulation processes, and with visualization processes inaugurated by the new media. The legitimation of the semi-public space, of the museum or public art gallery, seems to me to be still on the grounds of art history. But from where does an artist who works in today's public space derive his legitimacy? What discourse can he develop on? Must it always remain a derivative discourse?

Jan van Grunsven: The artist's legitimation and his social commitment both lie in a commitment to public space. The origin of the artist is art, and the field of application of art is public space. The legitimacy of art in public space is located precisely in the zone between the origin and the application, in the dialogue. Both are in the end inseparable components of what one might term the work of art. The artist is confronted with specific demands and conditions, the programme if you will, which is set or engendered by the situation within which he functions. Just before, I referred to the hardware, the software and the orgware of the design task. Other parties are involved in that programme, but unlike them an artist can manipulate the programme himself.

I think that if you base art in public space solely on art, you soon arrive at a purely symbolic approach – a symbolic practice rather than a realistic practice. After all, once an artist enters into a concrete relation with the complexity of social reality, he begins to take that reality seriously. He will have to involve all those who play a role within that reality in the process, to the extent that he can achieve what he has in mind. If he has not organized the process properly, or if the institutional field within which he works has not organized it properly, so that the artist remains insufficiently aware of the position he occupies with regard to the network of actors on the basis of which he operates, the whole exercise becomes little more than a mere artistic gesture. An action of this kind would fail to touch on the real functioning of the other actors, since it operates so to speak outside the social reality.

Jeanne van Heeswijk: To me there is no distinction between 'the artist' and 'the artist who works in public space'; as if they were not one and the same person, as if the former performs no more than a symbolic act and has no relation to the other parties. I don't believe in the argument that you have to place yourself on one side of the fence or the other. There are artists who perform a 'symbolic' act but who are capable of upholding excellent relations with the other parties. There must however be an intrinsic awareness that an artistic position entails upholding a relationship with the immediate context, and that it is precisely in that context that part of the realization of the work lies. In that respect it is all about an attitude that consists of 'relating to', and that's what you ought to teach. In art education, a distinction is all too often maintained between autonomous and functional ways of working, but in my view the position of the artist is always relatively autonomous. It is often this relatively autonomous position that breaks the ice in the usual processes that take place in public space, so that new collaborative relationships can arise. I also see it as important to seek new collaborations with a view to financing projects. My project for *De Strip*, [3] for example, was financed for the larger part by local sponsors, even more than by government subsidy, and out of the latter only 10 percent was 'art' money. Part of the artists' legitimacy naturally also comes from the various streams of finance. Every purse of money has so to speak a ticket tied to it specifying its intended purpose. But it is just as important to justify yourself towards the people with whom you collaborate. At the same time, I also hope to legitimize myself towards the professional field, because in my opinion it's also necessary to build up the range of ideas extant there. For example, it rankles with me that it's almost impossible (and this is my critique of the current art discourse) to get an intensive practice, in which you collaborate with many people on the same level,

recognized as an artistic practice. The art discourse still attaches so much importance to the name of the artist. I often have to fight tooth and nail for my autonomy, so as to make a different kind of practice possible. I'm not complaining about that, because I feel I am continually pushing the envelope of artistic practice. But the art world keeps hunting for its heroes.

At present, in collaborative projects, we are fantasizing about how I could have people refer to me privately by my surname, so that 'Jeanne van Heeswijk' could become a brand, which stands for a certain manner of collaboration that no longer has anything to do with the conventional notion of the individual artist. To me this is closely bound up with the question: how can you develop an artistic concept that consists not only of a work of art but also of a way of working? That's why, if we're talking about art in public space, you should no longer refer to an 'art object' but to an 'art objective'.

An explicit ideological standpoint could supply me with criteria for evaluating certain projects in public space. Shouldn't we speak of an artistic practice rather than a work of art? How is an artistic training supposed to facilitate something like political commitment?

Henk Slager: In my view, every artist ought ideally to have that commitment. To my eye, it's inherent in art. And the museum can be the platform for that critical,***engagé***, reflexivity. The borderline between the museum space and public space doesn't in my view have to be all that stringent. Our expectation at Utrecht is at any rate that students will take a clear visually-critical stance. The basic starting point of the course is reflection on the way artistic images can function within the visual culture. We presuppose a critical attitude ***a priori***. That, at least, is the point of departure. It is of secondary importance whether it relates to images in public space or images in other contexts, that is, whether it starts from the question of the possibility of a modern cultural critique or from the question of the current position of the artistic image. In Utrecht we treat the research projects of the graduate students as our basis. For example, if someone wants to do some research in the area of gender studies, that's OK with us. At the moment, for example, one of our students who takes an interest in gender issues is being co-supervised by Rosi Braidotti, Professor of Gender Studies at Utrecht University. That the course takes a stance critical of ideology is thus something you can take from me. It is after all taken for granted that students will take a reasonably critical attitude towards the prevailing image culture during the development of their project. Otherwise the project certainly won't go ahead.

To deal adequately with the problems of art and public space in relation to art education, the institution needs to maintain a good overview held of successfully completed projects. This could even be treated as a discipline, consisting of a systematic overview in which all the associated conditions and contexts could be scrutinized in a constructive way. There is in my view an absolutely vital need for a similar form of discourse formation that is related to case studies.

Jan van Grunsven: If the political momentum consists of engaging with group processes, you also have to specify which group, and which group process. There are very many artists operating in museum spaces who are sincerely committed, even politically. In the end, however, I have to admit that the 'museum artist' mainly has the museum context in mind when making a work, instead of genuinely trying to instigate something in society; whereas the 'open space artist' sees his fulfilment, or at least his most important moment, in 'bearing a relation to' or 'binding yourself to' society. It's a matter of different areas of expertise. Working in public space presumes a different expertise, a different approach, compared to working within the museum context.

Jouke Kleerebezem: The formation of an 'ideological standpoint' is in my view not

equivalent to being 'politically' committed. If we define politics very broadly as a form of awareness-raising interaction between people, it follows that you don't have to stick to a specific ideology in order to be politically active as an artist. I believe there exists a whole political field which is interwoven with the experiencing of works of art, whether seen in a museum or elsewhere. If you accept such a broad notion of politics, and investigate how it can be delimited and how it functions in every specific circumstance, then you are active as an artist in that area. It is of course possible to pay attention to politics in that sense as a part of a course of education. I myself favour a somewhat narrower and more modest conception of politics, and I am against the overvaluation of an ideology, especially when holding that ideology is regarded as a 'shortcut' to a socially committed practice of art! But I do see the merit of adopting a clear profile. Visible strategies and explicit standpoints allow distinct reactions, and a discourse may emerge from all the pros and cons. The formation of ideology then becomes one of the first matters that can be opened to discussion. I believe that in art practice you should aim to achieve a political momentum rather than a political direction. Perhaps it's a sign of the times, but I see it as all very *momentané*. I don't believe that in education you have to be capable of plotting out what the future is going to look like, because in trying to do so you will never win the backing of the necessary parties who are essential for setting up an interactive, multidisciplinary structure for research into art and the public domain.

Preparatory work for the discussion was carried out by Willem van Weelden and Henk Oosterling. Jorinde Seijdel wrote up the report.

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Footnotes

1. Starting from the academic year 2002, a new bachelor / master structure has been introduced into Dutch higher education. This structure is a detailed interpretation of the agreements arrived at by 29 European countries in Bologna in 1999 to harmonize academic qualifications for higher education by 2009. Rather than the length of study, it is the final level achieved that provides the criterion of international equivalence. Agreements were also made towards increased cooperation in the fields of quality assurance and curriculum development. Along with the bachelor-master system, an accreditation scheme was introduced in higher education. Educational courses will be reassessed for quality once every six years. The bachelor-master structure entails the separation of bachelor from master courses in higher education. The bachelor course comes after previous education at a secondary or technical school level; the master course follows after the bachelor course. Source: www.minocw.nl.
2. The Arnhem School, during the late 1960s and '70s, supported the use of fine art to enhance living conditions in the built environment. The ideologists of the Arnhem school were the artists Berend Hendriks and Peter Struycken, who were appointed as joint heads of the Architectural / Monumental Design department of the Arnhem academy of art.
3. From 23 May 2002 to 23 May 2004, an ambitious plan was developed and realized for accommodating a cultural zone in a strip of vacant shops in Vlaardingen, initiated Jeanne van Heeswijk.

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