

2003

The Head-dress

In the discussion about privatisation of public space, one automatically makes the connection to the increase of trade – and to the fact that more and more streets, squares and shopping malls are being organised and run by private enterprise, security companies and security cameras. It's not the collective of taxpayers, but entrepreneurs who have the authority to decide on how we should act in public space and what kind of rules we have to follow.

Another form of privatisation has to do with placing works of art in public space. Often a small group of experts decide what art work should appear in which space, and then explain their choice to the users of that public space without having asked them about it first.

Citizens also contribute to the privatisation of public space, and are witness to the irreversible success of the automobile in our society. The car, often and quite rightly referred to as the 'extension of our living room' is where we take a sense of security out of our house and into public space. We carry out intimate telephone conversations in the car, use the telephone as we would at home, play our favourite music and drink our coffee as if we were still sitting in our kitchens. We carry walkmans, hang mobile phones from our ears and fully contribute to the 'mediatisation' and further privatisation of public space. From this perspective, the public outcry concerning wearing a headdress is an usual phenomenon. This private statement in fact says a lot about the way we use our public space.

Before the discussion about headdresses became a hot topic in the Netherlands, there was a great deal of debate in Mexico about the role of masks. The Zapatistas, a movement of Indian farmers who protest against globalisation, wore masks when they appeared in public spaces. According to them, they were not trying to hide their identity but in fact the opposite, they wanted to show it. The masks served to accentuate their common beliefs and were used to protest the 'facelessness' of the political and economical regime that had de-marginalised them.

Masks and head-dresses are on the contrary, not extensions of our living room (at home they are not worn), but once more make the difference apparent between public and private space. In the case of the shopping mall, the art work, the car and the walkman, public space is becoming increasingly privatised, whereas on the other hand, the head-dress makes the private domain public again.

Public space has been and still is a place where meeting of others is made possible – a space where interest can be aroused.

In this context, the head-dress contributes in a unique way to the forming of the public domain and would appear to be a contemporary, global and collective answer to the increase in the privatisation of our public space. How many acts of publicity can we handle today?