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WHAT IS PUBLIC ART?

Public space is turning into an enormous database – the analogous variant of the computer. Architecture still feeds upon an alleged autonomous status, however, all architecture and all architectural elements are in fact carriers of pictures, information and adventure. Advertisements, logos and brand names, and also graffiti, stickers and flyers, have turned the city into a mass medium. Users of the city remix our public space. Signs, ideas and references are piling up more and more. Someone sticks a poster on a billboard, then another person puts a sticker on that poster, and again a third person tags the sticker. How can we deal with this overload of information? How can you filter messages from this information? How can you 'hack' the codes of public space? At this popular culture level two new concepts have come up: 'tagging' and 'jamming'. 'Tagging' (derived from the child's game 'to play at tags') and 'jamming' (which means 'interrupting' as well as 'playing together spontaneously') presuppose playing with, anticipating on, and rearranging information and pictures that surround us.

Many people wonder whether communicating is still possible amidst this overload. We should however be reserved about using the word 'communication' – after all, we live in a 'Communicracy'. Communication is always about undoing messages from their noises. Everybody – artists, journalists, advertisers, marketeers, brand-pickers – occupy themselves with communication these days. Each noise between sender and receiver must be cleared, so that messages can directly come across to a public, subculture, target group or market sector, without any disruptions. Communication says everything about our current state of permanent mobilisation.

But is the city not rather a creaky or noisy box? You have to filter information, pictures and messages from that noise, and you continue to look for possibilities to interweave your own information, pictures and messages within that noise. Noise is 'more democratic' than communication is: noise gives people the chance to design codes, in order to receive and send the messages they want to receive or send. Complexity is always more 'democratic' than reduction or simplification. The more complex a system is, the more opportunities it provides to log in and out whenever you want to. Public domain is always complex too: you are confronted with a multitude of impressions and messages in which you have to leave your own tracks and find your own way.

Under those circumstances 'culture jamming' is a logical result, but no longer restricted to romantic artists who leave their pieces, tags, posters, stickers and flyers in the public space. Nike advertises in Amsterdam with shabby posters, created in the tradition of people putting stickers on walls or writing graffiti on them, hoping to fob off that specific segment of the youth culture with an equally specific shoe. Heineken crams bus shelters with amateurish posters, which look like the posters artists initiatives or squats use to announce their illegal parties. McDonald's and Nighttown have made use of moulds in Rotterdam, with which the streets are sprayed 'spontaneously'. With its brute slogans the cigarette industry surpasses a negative publicity trend, which Adbusters once took up as a means of action.

Communication seems to have gone out of date and 'culture jamming' is increasingly replacing traditional ways of art, communication and advertising.

A 'good' public space can be defined as a public space that is public domain, or can become public domain. Public domain is understood to mean the possibility of exchange between different social groups, cultures, life styles and mentalities. Public domain encourages the interest for others, for each other, and for you yourself. It is a misconception to assume that public space and public domain are synonyms. A degenerate public space can be a public domain; a public space that has been designed with care and attention can stand in the way of public domain.

If the presence or lack of public domain is of crucial importance for the quality of the public space, this notion will also have consequences for our way of thinking about public art. Public art sets its face against privatisation of public space, or else, against curbing restraints on public domain. Public art wants to improve public domain and in the best case be a public domain itself. Art works in public space have encouraged the privatisation of that space for far too long. After all, art works that are created for 'the public' presuppose a non-existing consensus. With this they are mono-cultural. Art in public space once served to raise and relieve 'the civilian', 'the nation' or 'the proletariat'. Therefore, it is not surprising that authoritarian and socialist regimes produced so much art in public space. However, the public is a intercultural collection of representatives of social groups, lifestyles and mentalities. In this case it is better to speak of 'publics' that interact with each other and thus give expression to public domain.

After monuments and pedestals another form of art presented itself in public space: an art that wanted to be related to architecture and urban development. Again public domain was neglected and the interaction between social and cultural groups in public space disregarded. This variant too improves the privatisation of public space. Many artists and policy makers still make a mistake when they think that art in public space is public because it bypasses museums and galleries. Although there is no market for artworks in public space (you cannot collect public art), it does not mean that they are public, that they create publicity, that they are public domain.

Public art neither relates to a pure aesthetic founded relation between the artist and the public, nor between art and architecture. Public art precisely explores the area that arises between art and public space: that is where the work 'works'. In that 'interzone' art does not offer a consensus model, but shows the interests, contradictions, conflicts, discussions, dreams and desires that define public domain. Olu Oguibe summarized the essence of public art during a lecture in the Rotterdam Paulus Church (*The Artist In The Public Space*, 2001): public art is no cultural offensive for a general public; does not comprise governmental regulations or sanctions; and does not see public space as a place for personal meditation. Can you dig it?

'Culture jamming' and 'tagging' are contemporary manifestations of public domain, and this also counts for public art. Public art working – let's turn it into a verb and make it real – stands for playing with, anticipating on, and rearranging the fabric of life that surrounds us. And the beat goes on...