

2005

**POSTSCRIPT TO EVA FOTIADI'S PhD RESEARCH PROJECT
'PUBLIC, PARTICIPATORY AND EPHEMERAL ART PROJECTS IN
EUROPEAN CONTEXT 1980-2000'**

First I want to make some general remarks. The questions raised in the introduction of Eva's paper are very important to understand contemporary art developments and to understand that growing interest in public art within art communities and art discourses that always preferred to speak about art in public space instead of public art. As Michael Kelly once wrote – rethinking and criticizing Richard Serra's Tilted Arc debacle: authoritarian regimes with strong interests in state protected art, have indeed produced a lot of art in public space, however, they have contributed hardly to public art. Perhaps this is why so many American writers dominate the contemporary public art debate. In this sense, a new research that focuses on public art in European context should be considered as a welcome contribution to our art discourse.

It is true that the nineties witnessed an exodus of artists from art institutions to the public sphere. But their motives have been much more diverse than generally is acknowledged. There hasn't been done much of research within this field. What kind of arguments are heard? Some have criticized the ongoing commodification of art galleries and stepped out; others just wanted easy access to an audience they weren't able to reach, since they lacked the support to get inaugurated in the art world; some got excited by hip hop, street art and post-graffiti urban culture and tried to bridge the gap between high and low art; others got involved in community art projects, imported to the global city by a wide range of ethnic and social minorities; some explored the digital promises of a new civil society and tried to redefine public space, publicness and publicity; others witnessed the rise of the creative class – designers, architects, film makers, fashion designers, etcetera – and concluded that artists lost their monopoly on creativity and new alliances were necessary in order to survive. Some argued that art has become the last public space in a totally privatised world; others used art as a disguise for setting up private enterprises. The list is probably longer than this.

What many of them had in common was the discovery or rediscovery of public art – that global, old fashioned and almost forgotten brand of art, not produced for the anonymous, enlightened public inhabiting the art world, but for and with specific publics in the public realm, according to their singular needs, wishes, dreams and opinions. They discovered that the public was more than just traffic: anonymous people who were taken into consideration only insofar as they could be expected to have perceptual experiences of their art works. Perhaps this is the biggest break with the so called 'social art' of the sixties and seventies, that judged the public in abstract terms, in terms of 'the proletariat', 'the people' or 'the working class'. In her research, Eva is the first European critic that speaks of publics and audiences.

This new generation of public artists also discovered the decline of the social and the welfare state, especially in western Europe, and discovered new types of social activities, new types of commissioners and new ways of funding: housing corporations, neighbourhood committees, ethnic organizations and religious institutes became their partners and who turned out to be grateful commissioners. They were

welcomed by city planners and urban economists who - after reading Saskia Sassen's *The Global City* or Charles Landry's *The Creative City* - started to make use of artists as crowbars in gentrification processes. While state grants and art budgets decreased, at the same time an exciting variety of investments in public art increased.

Within this context, the notions of participation, collaboration and cooperation are no anomalies, but obvious essential characteristics. Think of this public art magazine that is published in Dublin, Ireland: 'Artworking in Partnership'. Artists adopted the practices of the creative class and hired themselves out to social and cultural markets. Suddenly there turned out to be a demand for art, something no one expected. Art in Western Europe was always based on supply - art was supplied by the government and demand was never valued as a positive quality. Art communities in western Europe still have the tendency to judge the quality of art by standards of western art history, set by inside experts and art commissions. Strangely, they still cling to vanguard notions of autonomy and originality and usually not to qualities of participation, collaboration, cooperation and public opinion. In Rotterdam for instance, the official art community values the exhibitions in TENT. as more important than public art projects, both initiated by the same Centre for the Arts. But if we take a look at the coverage of art projects in local and national news papers, Rotterdam public art projects prove to be far more prolific.

Let's get back to the questions raised in the introduction: How do public artists perceive the potential of their work outside the art world? And: How do they achieve success within the art world? The first question is the most easy one to answer: artists, working in the global cities of western Europe have reasons to be optimistic about their potentials. In reinventing public art and new ways of funding, they reinvent art itself by providing their nameless and faceless audience with a name and face. The collapse of the traditional, state protected and supplied art discourse will prove to be fruitful for public art.

The question whether they will be successful within the art world is harder to answer. Our hope should lie in an opening up of local art institutes, that is, in a further globalization of the art community. An example can be found in Tracer, an exhibition recently organized by art centre Witte de With and TENT at Rotterdam to celebrate their fifth anniversary. Both centres decided not to use their own curators but invited five international curators and asked them to invite their favourite Rotterdam artists. They chose a whole bunch of public artists like Navin Thakoer, Hieke Pars, Joe Cillen and others, who hardly had access to the official art community. In other words, their works were appreciated by non-insiders and their presentations did not detonate at all - in fact they showed Rotterdam a new, that is, public approach to art.