

2007

PUBLIC ART - ROTTERDAM - JAKARTA

I'm honoured to be part of this seminar. This is my first visit to the Republic of Indonesia, however, some fragmented knowledge of colonial and post-colonial Indonesia, passed on through personal stories by relatives and history lessons at school, has become rooted in my genetic consciousness. I realize these coloured narratives and images have probably only attributed to a kind of colour-blindness, which makes me an ignorant stranger in your country. I hope you will excuse me as an outsider for not being able to explore the Indonesian situation here, yet discussing the Dutch and Rotterdam context in particular. And I hope you will excuse me for not speaking your language.

Being announced as "a speaker from abroad who is able to talk about the [public art] situation in his country, having a more mature tradition of city planning", urges me to make some comments first. Yes, Rotterdam does have mature traditions of public planning and art – in fact we are the only Dutch city with a genuine public art department. However, drastic demographic changes and the process of globalisation, have also forced countries with mature traditions to re-invent themselves. For instance, the growing influence of Muslim and Afro-Caribbean cultures within Dutch society, and consequently, the challenges they offer for art in general and public art in particular, draw heavily on city traditions, policies and programs. Since a decade therefore, the public art department in Rotterdam recognises two specific perspectives or even domains: art in public space and new genre public art. These domains are fuelled by issues raised by people like Tom Finkelpearl, former director of the New York percent for art program: "The history of public art is most often told with an emphasis on the word 'art', and very little consideration of the public context" (see "*Dialogues in Public Art*", 2000). I will get back to this distinction later. In short, how mature our traditions may seem, today we are desperately in need of new ideas, alternative practices and fruitful cultural exchanges, in order to re-invent public art in a many-cultured city. So this foreign speaker wishes to learn from your approaches and re-inventions as well. I hope I'm

able to invite you to visit our city one day and continue our mutual talk about public art and possible futures. My lecture today is not so much concerned with contemporary theories on public art, but I will try to stick as close as I can to the Rotterdam public art practice and the challenges we encounter on an institutional level.

Public art is not public because it bypasses museums and galleries; it is not public because art works are placed outdoors; it is not public because you don't have to pay an entrance fee in order to visit the art works. Public art is public because its values are not triggered by commercial motives. Public art tends to escape the market and the works can not be sold by auction at Christie's. Public art exists because of its fundamental relationships between the works of art and the publics – public art is at best an in-between, an interzone.

As we all know, as a historical phenomenon, art in public space has always been part of the realms of popes and kings. The church and the state erected statues of superhuman royal and military leaders, political and religious inspirers, always placed on grand pedestals, from which they looked down on us – small and humble humans. These monuments were part of the society of control and provided guidelines how to become a good, i.e. submissive civilian. Even in their later secularist disguise, they still performed many of these functions. In 19th century Holland, liberal lobby groups defined Dutch identity from a nationalist perspective. Inventing this tradition, they used the Golden Age, the 17th century, as the coming of age of the Netherlands and Dutch identity. Golden Age writers like Joost van den Vondel, artists like Rembrandt and philosophers like Spinoza, were heralded as the champions of Dutch identity and culture. The liberals envisioned the streets, public space, as an illustrated history of Dutch history and grandeur. Their monuments and pedestals resembled the old bronze and stone kings, generals and popes. It is hard to imagine that a foreign visitor, lacking historical knowledge of the Netherlands, could see any difference between the two domains.

Till far in the 20th century, art in public space was closely connected to the state, the city and political lobby groups. American writer Michael Kelly once remarked that countries with strong or authoritarian governments which are not directly responsible

to the public, set great value to art in public space (see his essay “*Public Art Controversy*”, 2002). This was especially true for socialist, communist and fascist regimes and it is not surprising that revolts and revolutions always include assaults on public monuments – think of the angry mob that dragged down Saddam Hoessein’s statue in Baghdad on the 9th of April 2003. On a smaller, more local scale comparable cases are manifest. A Catholic village in the south of the Netherlands had to remove a statue of an early 20th century priest several times, for locals kept assaulting the bronze bust at night time. They kept the man responsible for mental harm done to their families. Sometimes the same mistrust is expressed against works of autonomous art. In Rotterdam recently, a bronze sculpture by American artist Paul McCarthy – a huge Santa Claus, carrying a dildo – could not be placed in the public space and had to be locked up in a museum, since public opinion had turned against it. I don’t think the audience actually criticised the provocative design, however, as taxpayers they seemed to blame the city council for not being informed about the content and the chosen location in the first place. Public art is a matter of democracy. With the last example I’ve reached some problems at home. So let me elaborate on the Rotterdam situation first. How did the city develop its public art tradition? Who are responsible for it? How is public art financed? How is public art related to city planning? What are the differences between public art and new genre public art and how is this perspective organised on an institutional level?

Contemporary public art in Rotterdam is associated closely with the Second World War. On the 14th of May 1940, the city centre of Rotterdam was totally destroyed by a German air fleet bombardment, causing the Dutch to surrender themselves to the occupier a couple of days later. The city was in ruins and had to be build up again completely – that’s why Rotterdam is the most modern city of the Netherlands today; why architects like Rem Koolhaas chose the city as their hometown; why modern and post-modern architecture has become a tourist attraction; and why its city planners have gained a worldwide reputation. After the war (1945), a series of memorials and monuments had to commemorate the loss of lives in Rotterdam: civilians, soldiers, deported and murdered Jews. The brutal rape and destruction of the inner city was also commemorated, often through remarkable sculptures made by internationally known artists, paid by local entrepreneurs and businessmen and consequently granted to the city as a gift. Sculptures like Zadkine’s “Destroyed City” (1953) or

Naum Gabo's "Stylised Flower" (1957) are examples. These huge sculptures fitted well in the still empty public spaces, waiting for city planners and their ideas to move in. However, due to these gifts, public art was more or less a private affair. The only public activities consisted of taking care of permits, finding a suitable location and inviting the mayor to deliver a speech at the unveiling of the sculpture. The publics were hardly involved in anything.

In 1960 the city council expressed the will to be in charge and to take full responsibility for public art. A series of regulations were formulated in order to develop a more coherent policy – let us summarise these regulations as the "Percent for Art Program". Three wishes were formulated:

- The wish to compose an ambitious sculpture collection;
- the wish to decorate local governmental buildings with art works;
- the wish to infuse public space with art.

The approach however was still elitist. A small committee of insiders decided which kind of art was important for our city and which sculptures should be bought in order to build up a fine urban public art collection. Over the years, this program resulted in two collections. There is a more or less local Rotterdam art collection, with sculptures produced by local and national artists. This collection encloses approximately 250 art works. Consequently there is an international collection, called Sculpture International Rotterdam (SIR). The advisory board of the latter is installed by the city council and their budgets (200.000 euro each year) are funded by the City Decoration Fund. In fact this is the only public art fund, making it possible to decide autonomously which sculptures are needed for Rotterdam and where they should be placed. They are not necessarily location responsive. SIR consists today of approximately forty sculptures and art works.

Most public art however, including the local public art collection, is financed by building and construction programs, making it possible to use the 1960 percent for art site-specific regulations. This program makes sure public art is always part of city planning and public space design. If there is a budget, ad hoc committees are usually

formed, consisting of public art officials, public space designers, sometimes architects, and – very important - local residents. Together they give shape to a process, called “site-responsiveness”: what are the qualities of the public space in question; what’s needed in that specific space; what kind of art is desirable and which artist should team up with the group; and what kind of steps and procedures are to be taken. This contemporary form of democracy developed over the years. It is hard to say how big the annual percent for art budgets are, as those budgets totally depend on construction programs, that is, totally depend on the commercial successes or failures of the city.

In the early seventies artists, politicians and residents started to criticise the elitist approach to public art. New programs, like “town painting” or “art in neighbourhoods” made it possible to finance murals and community art, and to take public art to the streets and the residents - to poorer suburbs and boroughs, far away from the city centre and far away from art insiders who tend to monopolise the art discourse. This movement also injected more traditional ways of decision making: different publics or users of public space (residents, children, workers, women, minorities, shopkeepers, to mention only some of them) became part of the public art works themselves. They publicised art - they made art public.

But democracy and community art are not always good companions of city planning and local/global prestige. The classic sculpture or monument adds far better to a city’s pride and self-image. As icons, landmarks, congealed memories, tourist attractions or even logo’s, they produce an urban identity. In the last decade this tension resulted in two different public art genre’s. And two different public art directors, however both associated with one Centre for the Arts in Rotterdam. Roughly said, my colleague runs the Collection & Inheritance department – of which Sculpture International Rotterdam and most percent for art projects make up the bulk of the work; and I am responsible for the Commissions & Projects department – focussing on new genre public art and commissions for local artists.

As a specific public art domain, Collection & Inheritance aims at creating and taking care of an ambitious collection of national and international art works. Starting point is the international high art discourse, and funds and motives are driven by urban

imagery and memory, by notions of history, by city pride and tourism. Processes of decision making are not democratic, yet reserved for experts. An independent committee of insiders is supposed to advise the mayor and the council. Every two years or so, a new sculpture or other art work is added to the public collection. Rotterdam is also known for its policies of maintenance. All sculptures are in a good shape, thanks to a small art & monuments unit, operating from within the public works department.

Commissions & Projects is a more diffuse domain. Community art projects, pop culture, murals, urban design, street furniture and public lightning, to mention only a few relatively new public art manifestations, do not attribute to a public art collection. By creating series of commissions for artists on different levels and in different scales – sometimes one hundred projects each year, the policy aims to push the arts into the urban environment and turn art and artists into visible aspects of urban life. Since the nineties, many artists have left their studio's in order to transform the urban fabric of everyday life or to comment on issues like globalisation, commercialism or our rapidly changing many-cultured society. It is almost impossible to fund these projects in traditional ways. The City Decoration Fund or percent for art programs are not suited to finance these public art works. National funds, housing corporations, neighbourhood committees, schools and borough councils provide a large part of the necessary budgets. Here the public art director acts as a director first, not as a curator.

However, both public art domains try to cooperate and to decide what has to be done in Rotterdam and how the arts and public space are suited best. This does not mean there are no tensions. There is a continuing debate about city planning and development, about public space design and about the audiences public art is made for. Why do we need those ambitious art works in public space – don't we have enough of them already? Is art able to survive in a context of globalisation, billboards, advertising and spectacular commodities? Does community art lead to bad quality art? Why should public space and public art be laboratories for human empowerment? Do Muslims or Antilleans or Hindus deserve other, non-Western works of art or do we just have to educate them in order to introduce them to our own traditions of art? Is the praxis of democracy compatible with the production and high

quality standards of art? The whole debate about public art has become totally intertwined with the public art infrastructure of today's Rotterdam. All tensions and opinions are visible within a wide range of commissioned public art projects. And we try to extend this debate to the field of city planners and public space designers. I don't think we are totally effective in this - considering the relative small influence of the arts on large scale city planning, however, someone has got to do the job.

In 2001 the Centre for the Arts organised a conference on public art called Urban Reflections. We invited almost eighty artists, architects and city planners and questioned them about the ways they viewed public space and public art. Key note speaker and artist Olu Oguibe elaborated on this theme and hesitated to define public art. Instead he came up with four negative aspects:

- Public art is not an instrument of civilisation politics, suited to serve the people or the proletariat or the citizens, that is, to serve a general, abstract and faceless audience – public art recognises different publics – different groups of users and different uses of public space;
- Public art does not enclose governmental regulations or sanctions – public art breaths public opinion and depends largely on civil initiatives;
- Public art is incompatible with private, exclusive notions of an artist – there's a difference between public art and private art;
- Public art does not view public space as a place for personal and private meditation and does not view public space as an outdoor museum.

This is an interesting definition – and a break with former opinions. One of the biggest Dutch public art bureaus once stated: “Many artists do not have the slightest interest in public space, however, they are capable of creating the finest art works for the public space”. In other words, let the artists do their jobs en let us, public art professionals, find a piece of space for those works. I think this is a cynical option: shouldn't we demand a more genuine interest in public space and in the publics that are to be confronted with public art? Or to put it differently: isn't there a difference indeed between a public artist and a private artist?

The following debates and interviews of the Urban Reflections conference were very interesting. In the end we recognised five different perspectives on public art. It may seem like wordplay, but this is how we summarised these opinions:

- Art in Public Space - the traditional approach: you've got a work of art and you need a place to put it somewhere (sculptures, monuments, urban design, murals...);
- Art of Public Space – the spatial approach: a public space can be a creative fabric, you only need to program art projects to reveal the potentials of the space and to make them visible (festivals, interventions, temporary art works or projects...);
- Public Space as Art – the city planning approach: in a context of globalisation parts of the cities are planned and developed as collective art works (squares, shopping districts, air ports, entertainment areas, gentrified apartment areas...);
- Art as Public Space – the democratic approach: many artists consider their works to be public spaces themselves, opening up possibilities for interaction and cultural exchange (media art, community art, hip hop oriented art, art education...);
- Public Space as a Multi-sensory Domain the multi-media approach: questioning the visual dominance of western art, many artists make an appeal to non-visual means of communication (sound, smell, skin, feel, body...).

Being public art officials - always negotiating between commissions, funds, motives, the city and art – these playful definitions help us to understand why professionals – artists and city planners - are interested in public art, how they view public art, and how these different opinions, these demands, should be encountered by the art community. We should be careful not to turn them into institutionalised regulations, but they can help us seeing more clearly and help us to create a suitable program or format of decision making. In short, dealing with contemporary public art in a global and commercialised society, in which private spaces are rapidly increasing, you have to combine the qualities of an artist, a scientist, a curator, a director and a producer – the role depends on demands and publics.

I hope we can discuss some of the issues raised here and start to unravel the complex relations between urban planning and public art. By its local nature, since the sixties public art in Rotterdam has always been connected with city planning. Regulations like the percent for art program or the City Decoration Fund have guaranteed that specific connection. Budgets had to be pulled out of building programs. Vice versa, knowledge of building programs and planning have influenced the nature of public art in Rotterdam thoroughly. This is also why local public art policies have never been decentralised and handed over to community councils, like in Amsterdam. This connection laid out the foundations of a beautiful public art collection, still vital and still transforming today.

On the other hand, for new developments within public art for many-cultured societies – summarised in the notion of new genre public art (see Suzanne Lacy's "*Mapping The Terrain*", 1995) – we need to be very creative in finding an alternative funding and an alternative discourse. If we wish to pay more attention to the idea of 'public' within the notion of 'public art', we may not need the companionship of city planners and architects. Perhaps we should look elsewhere and find new friends and allies. In Jakarta for instance.