Public as Practice

Jeroen Boomgaard

Jeroen Boomgaard, lector at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and head of Master's programme Artistic Research at the Universiteit van Amsterdam.

What does it actually mean to belong to a public? Strangely enough, this question is hardly addressed in publications about the issue of the public. Public is never approached from an individual perspective, but is always seen as a group, as an undifferentiated mass that must be segmented, reached and serviced in order to let the cultural market function. However, those discussing the issue rarely seem to be a part of that real potential public themselves. In this article, by contrast, I will attempt to study the public from that personal perspective. Obviously, this attempt is doomed to fail, since I, as a professional beholder, am 'hors publique': I am supposed to observe everything with interest, to always be there without being actually involved. That I will nonetheless attempt to explore the public from a personal point of view is because I wish to find out how the individual and the general are intertwined when one is part of a public, and how this relates to the confusion between the private and the public that is characteristic of public space nowadays. In the course of this exploration I will inevitably move on from my own experience to that of a supposed group bound 'I'.

Today, the public is more present than ever before. It is not only one of the main elements that determine the policies of governments and art institutes, but is more massively present than ever before, both physically and virtually. Museums and other art institutes are expected to go to extremes in order to reach out to a 'different' public. Highly educated, grey-haired people no longer suffice: the intended target group is young, poly cultural and unskilled. And more than ever, museums use all possible means, from a multitude of social media to logistic operations, to bring in this potential public. Such efforts also affect programming. Thinking in terms of target groups implies that they differ in their preferences and that this should be taken into account if they are to be reached.

These target groups usually are rather vaguely defined in socio-cultural terms: they are defined by a combination of chance and choice. Unwished-for economic circumstances go hand-in-hand with self-selected spending patterns, which makes it difficult to decide how best to approach such groups. Following the Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers, I will call these different groups forming as many publics 'practices', because attracting these potential publics can only succeed if

one manages to relate to the manner in which they regard their being-a-public as part of their practice. After all, before I visited that specific exhibition in that particular museum, I was already part of a certain public, since I was willing to go to an exhibition, or to go and see that artwork. The practice that determines that I am or will be that public is primarily formed by upbringing and education and is embedded in other forms and activities, in a complex whole of choices and habits, places and presences, that play a part in my decision to go and look at art in that place, and at that moment. As Stengers stresses, it is a practice to which I belong, not one I am a part of. The distinction lies in the overarching, passive character of the latter phrase, against the active, conscious one of the former.[1] This is not about consuming, at least it cannot be reduced to that, but about an act, a choice, an activity. By belonging to a certain public practice I, as public, am an a priori 'we', because otherwise I would not have been there at that moment at all. A practice comes with rules and responsibilities, it allows me to do, understand and produce things. Or not to do them, or to neglect them, without leaving that practice behind. If we regard being-public as part of a certain practice, we also understand how we can be an art public without actually visiting a museum or theatre. We regard the mere possibility to make use of these cultural facilities as part of our practice and this co-determines our preference for where to live, as was shown in Gerard Marlet's study.[2]

A major part of the current policy of museums can be understood as an attempt to become part of public practices that do not naturally include museums in their domain. Seen from this perspective, it also becomes clear why museums spread their activities in such a manner that they sometimes resemble shops, coffee bars or restaurants more than places where art is paramount. We cannot simply dismiss the motives for this as commercial gain or a neglect of core tasks: these are elements that belong to certain practices, practices that can be stretched by making looking at art part of the experience of shopping, drinking a café latte and having a nice dinner. By transforming themselves into less unequivocal places, by becoming nodes of practices, museums of contemporary art succeed in hosting other practices too: one can now visit a museum of modern art without immediately regarding oneself as its public.

Public Practices

What kind of public am I outside the museum? In what way is art in the public domain part of my practice? Or perhaps the question should be: in what way can art in the public domain be part of existing practices? Because whereas it is clear that in the museum a number of different practices come together, the public in public space is by definition indeterminate. There is no specific public for these artworks, which have to fend for themselves without the benefit of a clear fram-

ework. It is this vagueness that makes it difficult for artists to clearly place their work and drives commissioning bodies to distraction because they don't really know whether the work they have commissioned will be embraced, tolerated, ignored or rejected.

This was not always so. Just as the museum for modern art was once for everyone without being accountable for whether anyone actually came, art in public space used to lead a carefree existence in the belief that it benefited the common good. After this general visual language was exposed as the representation of the self-interest of the ruling class, a lot changed. The public no longer consists of an unstructured collection of individuals but, in the public domain as in the museum, of specific groups that all require a specific approach. But whereas in the museum it is a matter of bringing these groups together by creating an environment and providing a programme that meets their wishes, in public space it is art itself that must adapt to certain places and communities. Over the past few decades, the public domain has been subdivided into ever more intricate zones and areas with specific aims or characteristics. And the artworks take their place in this. While the inner cities are for festivals and spectacular landmark artworks that should convince visitors of the cultural value of the city, in the residential areas outside the centre the needs of the population must be met by more accessible art. And in underprivileged neighbourhoods—euphemistically renamed 'power neighbourhoods' in the Netherlands—the focus is on projects that foreground social participation and co-creation.

However, such emphatic localizing and territorializing appear to become less and less necessary. Social media now enable us to continue our shared practices anywhere, anytime. All we need is an available network. But this virtual practice, which is neither completely private nor fully public and so clearly demonstrates that the core of the We feeling, of the choices and responsibilities that come with belonging to a certain practice, cannot escape from the physical environment that I perforce share with others: other individuals, groups and practices. Where I live, work, do my shopping and go out is part of the practices to which I belong, while simultaneously shaping them.

Stengers advocates approaching different practices from their own preferences and not gauge them by general values that either belittle them or force them onto the defensive. She specifically opposes enlightenment operations aimed at eliciting hidden or suppressed creative forces.[3] Many current social practices are facing this reproach, and I will come back to that later. An agenda aimed at education and emancipation is however no longer the obvious thing. More and more often Dutch government policy stimulates and supports art projects that aim to consolidate or facilitate existing practices. The 'ecology of practices' mentioned by Stengers appears to be the guiding principle of this policy. Social cohesion,

neighbourhood meetings, empowerment of the disenfranchised, but also a policy aimed at realizing artworks on the initiative of local residents, as practised by the CBK (Centre for Visual Art) in Rotterdam: it all points to reinforcing public practices as a method to enhance the quality of life in the city and make residents feel at home in a context that adapts itself to them instead of the other way around.

No matter how successful this approach may be, it does have its downsides. The ecology of practices is not all peaceful. Different public practices can severely hinder each other or even be mutually exclusive. Any policy wishing to steer things in the right direction will inevitably favour certain living habits and preferences and certain groups will be marginalized or excluded because of strategic or stealthy gentrification of certain areas. And such a policy, as Pascal Gielen observes, also results in an impoverished public domain. The confrontation with what is different, deviant and strange is increasingly avoided and we lose sight of the fundamental differences between certain practices. People living in cities are no longer questioned as to their preferences and prejudices. Because of this, not just the political dimension of the public domain is lost, as Gielen states, but one may also wonder where on this neatly ordered map of preferences and practices there is still a place for publicness, a place one could call public.[4] Within the context of the present text the main objection is that this approach robs art of its ability to bring about the openness of the society, the essential space for what is other and different.[5] To come back to the question at the beginning of this essay: in the public domain I am increasingly waited on hand and foot, but is that what I expect in my public practice?

Not-I

Let's leave the street and return to the exhibition space. Whereas music is known for forming bonds, many forms of visual art appeal to individual experience, which makes the presence of others irksome rather than stimulating.[6] According to the Danish sculptor/installation artist Olafur Eliasson, the only thing that visitors to an exhibition have in common is that they are completely different from each other. Everyone sees and thinks something different in the encounter with an artwork, yet the entire communication strategy of the museum that displays the work is aimed at combining this multitude of experiences into the greatest common denominator. Still according to Eliasson, this means that visitors are addressed in a moralizing or patronizing manner.[7] And he is right. The minute I visit an exhibition, I am part of the public there and addressed accordingly. And this annoys me, as does the presence of others admiring the same work and saying the same thing I am saying or perhaps something altogether different. However, I doubt whether this only applies to visual art. Other art forms may

be geared to receiving their public in groups and have a public that is sharing something by definition, if only by the fact that they see the same thing at the same moment at the same location. Still, the discomfort invoked by sharing an unshareable experience is something I can also feel when attending a performance of experimental music. Much more than with classical music and also more than with exhibitions of art that has already been part of the art canon for a long time. Apparently my public practice has two sides: one that doesn't mind sharing the experience and accepts the We-feeling this evokes, and one that makes me feel uncomfortable and doesn't want to belong to a 'we'. If, based on experience, I assume that I share this not wanting to share an experience with many others, a public practice emerges that speaks to 'the individual', as opposed to a practice that gains in experiential strength through massiveness (rock concerts, sunny days in the park, sports and games, parties).

Eliasson describes the individual experience as follows: 'The fact is, of course, that everyone sees something different. Everyone sees himself or herself, you could say.' He calls supporting this experience a project of individualization. Although I agree with him that we all probably see something different, I doubt whether we only have ourselves in our sights. If artworks would only be our mirrors, they couldn't have the disruptive, unsettling effect we ascribe to them. Bruno Latour is more precise in his description of what happens in our encounter with an artwork, as this larger quote shows:

"A work of art *engages* us, and if it is quite true that it has to be interpreted, at no point do we have the feeling that we are free to do 'whatever we want' with it. If the work needs a *subjective* interpretation, it is in a very special sense of the adjective: we are *subject* to it, or rather we *win* our **subjectivity** through it. … Emitted by the work, such downloads allow the recipient to be moved while gradually becoming a 'friend of interpretable objects'. If listeners are gripped by a piece, it is not at all because they are projecting their own pathetic subjectivity on it; it is because the work demands that they, insignificant amateurs, brilliant interpreters, or passionate critics, become part of its *journey of instauration* – but without dictating what they must do to show themselves worthy of it."[8]

Becoming a subject, individualization, then is much more than simply recognizing ourselves. It is much more a process in which we become something that wasn't there before. At the risk of causing a huge conceptual confusion here and while realizing that I should present a much more elaborate exposé about these concepts that try to encapsulate what we, thrown back on ourselves, are, want, can, know and feel, I still would like to contrast this subjectification with the We-experience that we also have or, rather, execute as part of our public practice. I

don't mean to say that in this We-experience, in the choices we share with many others and in the experiences we gain in this and about which we communicate, write think and dream, we would not be subjects. Following Louis Althusser's central thesis with regard to the function of ideology, one could say that in these practices we, as part of these practices, are 'hailed as subjects'. And these days, this happens in a way and based on information about our preferences and choices that is much more elaborate than Althusser could ever have imagined. He regarded it as the basic ruse used by the dominant ideology to hide its suppressive character and make its subjects bring about their submission voluntarily.[9] The public practices I am referring to here are not purely suppressive, as they enable us to shape our lives and make us feel at home. They did not, however, emerge fully autonomous either and in that sense the subject that is constructed in them becomes an hotchpotch of social expectations, commercial incentives, personal impulses and exchange protocols that make us part of certain communities of wishes with overlapping life patterns, fears and desires. A personal public-private construct with all of the associated problems.[10] It is precisely this constructed subject, this 'I' that places me with that artwork at that moment, which—in the confrontation with that artwork—is torn down and has to be rebuilt from scratch.

I regard this disastrous effect that artworks can have on the makeshift construction we call 'I' as the essence of the autonomy of art. It is an effect that artworks seem to lose once we are used to them: the canon puts us at ease. Still, they never quite lose all their power: every good artwork retains the ability to move me to the core time and again, to hit me there were no public practice has been established yet. However, it must be given the opportunity to do so.

Manifestation and Misunderstanding

Outside the safe framework of the exhibition space artworks don't have much chance of exerting their disruptive powers. Lost in an undifferentiated public domain they disturb nothing and no one. It seems that art in the public space can only be saved by a policy of placing them within a certain framework, thereby connecting them to existing (public) practices in which their visibility is guaranteed. And yet this is not quite so. In a sense this emphatic embedding can become the very thing that disrupts the possible effect of art works in and for the public domain. To illustrate what this entices I will introduce the concept of manifestation. A manifestation is both the appearance of a phenomenon and a public display. Whereas the first meaning of the word stresses the moment of becoming public, the second one is more suggestive of the presence of participants, or a public. Within the framework of this text one could say that this second meaning is more in line with public practices, but the term is also quite useful to

characterize the various ways in which art is brought into public space and connected to existing practices. The preference for festivals that can mobilize many people for a short period, as well as the support of small-scale participation projects in which either real or fictitious communities work together on the initiative of an artist, show that gathering a certain audience for a certain event forms an essential starting point. Of course we cannot heap together all forms of art in public space, but even the revealing of a new sculpture in a refurbished square can be regarded as a manifestation, since the square manifests itself as new. It is an event that stresses the revised role of that place within the urban fabric, the influence of government and perhaps private parties in realizing it, and, finally, the practices in which the location is being inscribed. Then and there, the artwork symbolizes at once change and a connection to the real or desired community of the neighbourhood. While in huge political manifestations people express a shared protest or resistance, these organized gatherings create a shared experience and an experience of sharing.[11] One could also say that the careful alignment of the artwork with the wishes or needs of the residents and/or visitors makes a certain image of those wishes or needs concrete while excluding everything that deviates from them. Specific, unwanted practices are not included in the picture.

The shared experience that aims to stimulate and enhance these existing (public) practices is usually accompanied by an overdosis of communication. Only in this manner does the manifestation become coherent and generates the desired consensus. And although the embedding in existing practices is an absolute condition for the functioning of art in the public domain—without some form of recognition no form of acknowledgement is possible—the communication usually is not respectful of the artwork: the moralizing and patronizing signalled by Eliasson in the museum also applies to the public domain. And just as in an exhibition a dominant theme and smart information campaign can compel an artwork to soundlessly echo prompted wordings, the emphasis on communication with art in the public domain can render the artwork all but invisible, reducing it to no more than a vague shadow obscured by brochures filled with messages.

The trend as outlined above fits in the de-politicization of public space, as already observed by Gielen. The public domain is not something that must be established or confirmed; it is a social environment cum practice, a network of conflicts, confrontations, coalitions and constructions that is being realized over and over again, as it should be. In other words, the public domain is never designed and never to be taken for granted. Unlike with the current approach, art could be a much stronger disturbing element: the artwork as the pre-eminent deviant or other, in order to underline the constantly to be gained open character of shared space. In contrast with the view that art should convey what we have in common in order to support the public domain is Rancière's proposition

that it is precisely dissensus, the disruption of what our senses are used to, that provides the opportunity for change and innovation. Rancière, who is more extensively discussed elsewhere in this publication, considers dis-identification, the fact that the artwork does not meet our expectations, a condition for any form of emancipation.[12]

Identification and confirmation of my (public) practice thus seem to be in direct opposition to denying them as a condition for being able to speak of a domain with the possibility of openness. And whereas theorists who are more concerned with the value and functioning of art generally forefront dis-identification and dis-sensus, the theory of art in the public domain, even while embracing the basic idea of dissensus, advocates a necessary re-identification. The theory argues that the individual disruption of the senses and the resulting individualization or individuation cannot lead to the solidarity and joint resistance that are a condition for changing the political balance.[13] A certain form of re-identification seems inevitable if one really intends to challenge the powers that be.

High time to illustrate this with an example. Currently, in Flanders there is a project that not only clearly demonstrates some of the dilemmas mentioned earlier but also provides an adequate response to them. In the municipality of Herzele lies the old village Ressegem, one of the numerous townlets in the Flemish countryside. It boasts the remnants of a motte-and-bailey castle, an old presbytery and some farmhouses in beautiful surroundings that are feeling the pressure of urbanization. What is special about Ressegem is that there has been a piece of common land in the centre of the village since time memorial. Plans to do something with this land have invariably led to much disagreement and have met with resistance from local residents. An initial plan to build a new town hall and a block of apartments there was rejected, but an alternative plan to make it into a special nature area could not win the support of the community either. In 2015, a special regulation from the Flemish government made it possible to start an art project that might contribute to finding a solution.[14] Now, such circumstances tend to lead to participatory projects in which the artwork consist primarily of the collaboration between the artist and the residents and the joint production generated by it. An understandable choice, as art projects that start from participation solve the problem of a practice in which art hardly plays a role and is not easily transformed in a public practice, by simply exchanging the element of 'public' by that of 'participant'. This implies a number of risks. The implicit enlightenment strategy of this approach, aimed at bringing out hidden creative forces, was already signalled by Stengers. Also, quite often what comes to the fore as the community, is only a fraction of the actual residents, and the refusal to participate is either ignored or dismissed as impotence, when it would be better to regard this attitude as a defence of the own practice. Above all, ho-

wever, by emphasizing the We-experience such projects seem to be avoiding the disruptive effect of art at all costs, but in doing so they also miss the chance to let new forms of subjectivity emerge.

In Ressegem two artists, Birthe Leemeijer and David Helbich, in collaboration with curator Nils van Beek, have developed a non-standard approach that meets many of the objections. They propose to divide the commons in as many lots as there are residents and let each resident manage their own tiny piece of land. By doing so the project focuses on the community as a whole, on all the residents, while at the same time testing this community's cohesion and solidarity. More importantly, in my opinion, is that this approach brings back art to the point where its authority is most evident: the subject that must decide how to relate to the impossible choices that the artwork offers. And the outcome may well be negative. Contrary to models of public outreach that are common to art institutes as well as participatory projects, in which only presence and participation count, in this project the rejection will also become visible. Those who do not participate also own a piece of land that lies fallow, thereby proclaiming what choice was made. And exactly this, this manifestation of disinterest—which questions my own faith in art in the public domain and forces me to rethink my preferences and put them in perspective—is what turns this small piece of land in Ressegem into a true public space.

It is impossible to predict what the end result of this project will be. It is up to the residents to make something of it on the basis of the 'score' provided by the artists. They chose the word 'score' aptly, as it stresses the communal framework while at the same time showing the necessity of a personal interpretation. This score does not contain an explanation or the intent of the project. It only provides the volume, rhythm and melody. This leads to a double moment of interpretation, a dual appropriation that in my view is crucial to the functioning of art and one of the great advantages of art in the public domain over art in the context of a museum. On the first level the artwork is given a place within the conceptual framework of the community. It speaks to certain problems and wishes and fits in a certain (public) practice. Without that it has no chance of succeeding. This not only applies to participatory projects, but to all art in public space. However, this alignment does not mean that the artwork fits seamlessly into this conceptual framework. On the contrary, because the second level of interpretation—on which the artwork addresses my understanding and the practices associated with that understanding—can only come about when there is something that is beyond my capacity to understand, a surplus that cannot be appropriated seamlessly. Stengers posits that practices maintain themselves by manipulating everything that they take over from other practices and not using it as it was intended. This mis-understanding is the most important manner by

which art reaches groups, becomes part of practices where art usually has no place. Only in this manner does art find a new public, a public that is confirmed in its preferences and choices and at the same time is given the chance to become a different public in the future.

So here I am, face-to-face with an artwork in the public domain. Is it an artwork, or rather a concurrence of designed circumstances? Is there an intention, a meaning? There is no idea to support me. I have to find my own tentative way through this space that thereby becomes public.

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Annotations

1. Stengers 2005a, pp. 190–91.
2. Marlet 2009.
3. Stengers 2005a, p. 187.
4. Gielen 2015, p. 278.
5. For a further elaboration, see Boomgaard 2011.
6. Also see Sheikh 2015, p. 252.
7. Eliasson in a conversation with Ingo Niermann (Niermann 2011, pp. 36–37): 'The challenge for me would be to collect a bunch of data that would support the individualization of the viewer. The fact is, of course, that everyone sees something different. Everyone sees himself or herself, you could say. Not only because we think differently, we also see differently on a fundamental level … . And in the whole idea of art communication, art pedagogy, public relations—the whole notion of a museum—I would have to get used to the fact that the only common denominator there between people is that they are extremely different. I think it is possible to develop a plural language that speaks to everyone in a truly extraordinary, phenomenological way. Good artworks also do that on their own, but often the problem is that the institutions' communication efforts are so limiting or alarming that that everyone feels slightly moralized or patronized—controlled—by this extreme generalization. You could say that supporting differing perceptions is a project of individualization.'
8. Latour 2013, pp. 240–41.
9. Althusser 2001, pp. 115–18.
10. The public-private collaboration is the currently preferred way of constructing government buildings. It is a system that invites endless negotiations as all parties concerned want to have as many certainties, guarantees and windfalls as possible while the final result often brings mostly uncertainties and disappointments.
11. Zuidervaart 2011, p. 126: 'The special contribution of art in public is to help people carry out their explorations and presentations and interpretations in an imaginative fashion, to help them disclose in fresh and insightful ways the felt quality and lived experience of concerns that merit public attention. Products and events of art in public that accomplish this sort of imaginative disclosure exemplify and foster critical and creative dialogue both within various publics and among them. Such art also presupposes that the publics addressed, either potentially or actually, are not mere collections of self-interested individuals. The publics of art in public are themselves internally connected and cross-connected by virtue of shared traditions, social positioning, and patterns of interpretation that exceed and inform the experience of any individual member.'
12. Rancière 2009a, pp. 72–73: 'Aesthetic experience has a political effect to the extent that the loss of destination it presupposes disrupts the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations. What it produces is not rhetorical persuasion about what must be done. Nor is it the framing of a collective body. It is a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world they live in and the way they are 'equipped' to adapt to it. It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of the common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible. As such it allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation. However, this political effect occurs under the condition of an original disjunction, an original effect, which is the suspension of any direct relationship between cause and effect. The aesthetic effect is initially an effect of dis-identification.'
13. Mouffe 2008, pp. 154–55.
14. For an elaborate description of this project, see: Hammenecker, Laenen and Seurinck 2015, pp. 44–67.