

## Being liked

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*In 2008 Sjaak Langenberg and Rosé de Beer lived as artists in residence in Overvecht, a neighbourhood in the Dutch city of Utrecht. Overvecht is a huge high-rise district, with a few strips of grass and two parks. The neighbourhood suffers from relatively high unemployment, poverty and health problems, as well as criminality and an excess of families dependent on social security, unemployment benefit and other state help. The district is being renovated and modernised. Attention is also being paid to social aspects of the neighbourhood. A plan of action for the area has been made, entitled 'Take part in Overvecht!' to encourage people to join in community life. In a lecture on September 28th 2008 in the Central Museum in Utrecht, Sjaak Langenberg pursued the question of the role that artists can play in such a context.*

In contrast to an assignment which directly aims at soliciting the active involvement of residents into the project, in Overvecht we came across a different situation; children who are being kept indoors for fear of what can happen to them on the street, women who barely leave their homes. We decided to adapt ourselves to the customs of the neighbourhood. We stayed indoors, seeking out very little contact. 'Take part in Overvecht!' – announces the jolly slogan, in an attempt to encourage residents to participate. We decided not to take part. Staying indoors was an act of resistance against client's request that *weenter into something* with the residents. For more than ten years I've been entering into *things* with my audience, but *mysomething* is different from what clients these days are alluding to. The catchphrase 'Take part in Overvecht!' reminded me of the exhortations of my mother in my childhood, "Why don't you go outdoors and play? It's such nice weather. Everybody's outside!" It would have taken an army to get me outside. I never played outdoors. When boys from the neighbourhood came round to ask me out to play football, I invented an excuse or else I hid behind the sofa refusing to even answer the door. In my youth, football was synonymous with public space – that hell which began at the front door. Who would ever have thought that art in public space would become my profession?

In the Dutch art context, requests for community participation are the order of the day. There's a huge difference between the ambitions of artists who want to relate to their audience in a more direct fashion, and the ambitions of politicians who want to see residents softened up through participation so that they don't feel that the art project is being rammed down their throats. As an artist who is actively involved in manipulating an audience, I want to take this opportunity to clarify some of those differences. In 1997 I laid bare my attitudes toward art in public space with the book 'Sculpture with agoraphobia'. Discontented with the traditional exhibition model I sought out public space as my work terrain. 'Sculpture with agoraphobia' functioned like a crowbar to break open the world of art and public space. Starting from an unrestricted, open-minded point of view, I investigated the phenomenon, made suggestions and formulated arguments which clashed with my own ideas, trying to at no point spare myself.

Here too, I have no wish to spare myself. In Overvecht I asked myself time and time again why I wanted to take part in such a project? During the last ten years the world of art in public space has developed enormously. If, ten years ago, the work I was doing was like that of a missionary, now the possibilities for art in the public domain appear to be endless. Mission accomplished you could say. New tactics inevitably become institutionalized, shouldn't I be happy that the metier has opened up? No need for missionary work any more, space to concentrate on the content. It's now possible for art to infiltrate society everywhere and in every possible form. But that's exactly where it grates. There is no more unexplored territory. Art in the public

domain has become a format which can put your town or region on the map. Routinely there are insinuations from the art critics that this form of art barely distinguishes itself from social work. On occasion this is a rightful accusation, but not every artist who interacts with the audience in the public domain is in the process of making community art. In a climate where the opinions of citizens are playing a greater role, the involvement of residents in art projects is accruing a greater political charge, and with that, the disruptive function of art is being undermined. Politics and the media have become coquettish. The writer Herman Francke formulated it succinctly: 'Formerly the average man, as they say, was kept small, too small, often humiliated and trodden underfoot. But now, average people are, particularly by the mass media, being made too big, so now politicians confuse their simple negativity with great, political insights. Whilst in actual fact one should be able to assume political leaders have more sense than their people.' Can we then assume that artists should be one step ahead of their audience too?

For me the term 'residents' is an unwelcome narrowing down of the audience for a public art work. Although some great things are being done under the banner of community art, particularly in the field of site-specific theatre, I myself feel little affinity with this label. Community art is too friendly for me. I'm not out to make the audience like me but to incite them, to challenge them. A live connection between the canteen in a secondary school and the broadcasting headquarters of Amsterdam Airport Schiphol, which I brought into being at Cals College in IJsselstein, is not simply a gesture which appeals to the imagination, it's also somewhat painful when you hear that an aeroplane is departing for some exotic destination just at the moment when you have to get to the next class.

People can choose to go to the theatre, to see a film or go to the museum, but an encounter with art in public space is not something you select - it's there for everyone whether they want to see or hear it or not. That's its power but at the same time its weakness. An unbiased audience that approaches the project with an open mind, without the burden of art-historical baggage, is a blessing, but on the other hand, a lack of knowledge can also lead to disinterest or misinterpretation.

In Houten, where I was conducting a project, I was called to account by the local councillor responsible for culture who prompted me to actively seek contact with the inhabitants of the district - 'imbedded' and 'broad based' were his key words. In assignment correspondence these days one is almost by definition asked to involve residents in the planning, this takes the sting out of the relationship between artist and audience. In each new project you have to determine how you will relate to the audience - sometimes you get close, sometimes you stay at a distance. When, a couple of years later, it transpired that some of the inhabitants of South Houten had not found the surprise of the art in front of their doors pleasant, the new councillor in charge of culture took the residents very seriously, but he also defended with verve, the plans which had been embraced by his predecessor. Together with Matthijs Bosman and Krijn Christiaansen I had developed plans in which the pictorial language and rituals of an under-construction neighbourhood were translated into artworks for the district. Thus a mountain of builders' sand became a dune landscape and, other than the fear of sand drifting into front gardens, the gradual transformation appeared to be well received. But when we started to build a Turkish bathhouse and deliberately allowed the construction work to run aground in order to create a spot with space for unexpected functions, the cat was in amongst the pigeons. The builders' sign announcing the Turkish bathhouse declared, among other things, its future use as a projection screen for a small open air cinema, and from fear of noise nuisance, some people hung up posters announcing that their children couldn't sleep for the racket - this before any activity whatsoever had actually taken place.

The aspiration of the government of South Houten to actively involve residents in art in public space, turned out not to conform to the wishes of the new inhabitants, who were seeking peace and quiet in their new neighbourhood. A very realistic need - but we had been requested to stimulate people's involvement in the transactions in public space.

Writing this, I'm not out to make the audience like me, I don't mean to imply that I actually look for conflicts such as these. The role of provocateur doesn't actually suit me - which is why I was happy that things worked out in Houten. When I recently revisited the foundations of the Turkish bathhouse, I watched a mother having great difficulty in getting her child to leave and come home with her, but this conflict of interests seemed to make something clear about relationships in the public domain.

I have the urge to castigate myself again, like at the time I was writing 'Sculpture with agoraphobia'. I clung to a certain fallacy of originality. For a long time it was simple because art in public space was mostly a kind of unexplored wasteland, but now that each and every hamlet is having a go, the goal of uniqueness is untenable. The illusion of originality held up more easily ten years ago because the amount of available information was nothing compared to the way things are now. Just try Google-ing a great idea and you'll find yourself robbed of your illusion. Every possible product has at least thirty variations available on the shop shelves. Long live freedom of choice! Everything has been thought of. Everything has escalated. Nothing remains that is untouched. "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more," wrote the artist Douglas Huebler toward the end of the sixties in a plea for the dematerialisation of art. In the Netherlands at the end of the nineties, a stormy discussion about slowing down, was taking place. In surveys, consumers indicate that they would prefer less choices. Whoever is made nauseous by this rush-culture, experiences the world passing them by like a film. Worldwide human production has not only led to more objects, but because we are overfed with information we have become hyperconscious of everything that is going on at the same time. Even in ostensibly culturally deprived Overvecht, Rosé de Beer and I were confronted with a veritable deluge of activities: theatrical productions in lifts, operas on the balconies of high rise flats. It's swarming with relief workers. Nothing is allowed to simply fade into obscurity.

Is it still possible to create an authentic experience in a society where television programmes treat spoiled viewers to Extreme Makeovers? Can one think up an experience that makes a lasting impression in a world where the ultimate threshold has already been overcome with tourists who, for a certain sum, arrange to have themselves kidnapped in Yemen, or when notoriously wealthy people are paying for trips into outer space? This Rosé de Beer and I wondered when we were invited to design an experience which would be something that people could give as a present. To start with we decided not to give, but to ask for something from our audience. Whoever would give us their house keys for a day would receive, in return for this trust, a story about their home environment. Without actually changing anything in or around the houses, we brought about a metamorphosis. When it was over, the residents got their keys back and received via the post, the story about their home. We never met one another in person, and this relationship to our audience gave an element of suspense to the project. If a work of art doesn't inhabit that field of tension, it can become snowed under in the torrent of cultural projects, regardless of all the good intentions of community art.

Sheltered housing complex Zuylenstede, in Overvecht, embraced our plan to have a 'geisha' visit the residents by means of the window cleaner's cradle. It was great to work in surroundings where we were really welcome. But from the first moment it was clear that it wouldn't be only friends we would make there. The Japanese role in WW II is still engraved in the memories of some of the pensioners so our plan to link Japanese culture to the daily comings and goings of the home was not without risks. Commendably, the

management of Zuylenstede did not endeavour to steer clear of this discussion. Sometimes you shouldn't want just to be liked. We chalked out our own route to the residents' group in Overvecht and determined for ourselves in what way we wanted to communicate with them. Between the magnificent view of Overvecht, the limited space for the geisha to move in the window cleaner's cradle, and the shrinking world of the elderly people, a miraculous connection was formed. We entered into *something* with the residents. But there was indeed a window between the geisha and her audience as a result of which she could appeal to the imagination - an apparition which, as an autonomous image, could detach itself from all the daily worries in Overvecht.

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