

BEING PUBLIC

How Art Creates the Public

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Making Public

Valiz

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ON NOT FALLING IN LINE, OR HOW
TO BECOME A PUBLIC

Rogier Brom

Alone together, beyond the crowd
Above the world, we're not too proud
To cling together; we're strong
As long as we're together
—Howard Dietz

In his lyrics for the jazz standard *Alone Together*, Howard Dietz demonstrates the power of uniting. Whether it is love, opportunism, financial gains or, by contrast, a social opportunity, as soon as a group of people start to resist the will of the majority, they assume a shared identity. Whether this situation is short-lived or more permanent, the power of the group always lies in the cohesion within which each group member takes up an active position within the collective situation. A work of art can be a good reason for such a group to be formed. From the interest in the work that the onlookers share for the shorter or longer term, they form a group, which in the art world is usually called a public. And although this designation seems quite clear, what it means exactly is hard to find in the literature. In this essay I will concern myself with the question of how a group of people becomes a public. Because, whether a public is seen as fluid or as a group that can manifest itself on many different levels as well as in many time periods, there is one common element: there was a moment when it was formed. Asking questions about how an unstructured group of people makes the transition to a public brings with it a stream of other questions. I will confine myself here to the role of art objects in this.

Art is often attributed with the potential to bind groups of people. Certainly when it comes to initiatives in the area of community art or participatory art—but less directly also with much other art in public space—it is assumed that 'the public' is activated. Often it is not clear whether this public is already present or is yet to be formed. I will address the functioning of the cohesion within a group of people that can be activated and thus becomes a public, and the role

that an art object has in this. The question that I ask myself is whether this role is really a bonding one or that in fact its subversive potential is much stronger. In doing so I do not use the definition of public as a place that belongs to a community nor as a series of services and objects to which a community—and not just an individual—can lay claim. I consider public to be a performative concept, a temporary community that is activated to relate itself to a whole of which it is part.

Experience as an Active Quality

Usually, when one is part of a group, one knows, to a certain extent, what the ‘unwritten rules’ are. The situation is clear and everyone knows the code. Even if you are not consciously aware of the code, you often have an intuitive sense of what it is. In the last edition of 2015 of *De Witte Raaf*, Rudi Laermans calls this ‘experience ability’ (*ervaringskunnen*), a ‘potential that time and again becomes specific in relation to a particular task’. He adds that a gap that forms between the environment within which an experience originated and the characteristics of the situation in which this experience actively manifests itself, is only consciously experienced if the two are very different. Actually, Laermans states that the

1 boundary of all practical knowledge ‘coincides with the
Laermans 2015. past in which it was shaped’.¹ This very awareness—and
how we deal with its absence or presence—is what I intend
to explore further in this essay. For example, what happens during those moments when the situation is not clear; when multiple situations and their respective codes intermingle? Can we then still speak of a gap, or is there more to it? In doing so I attempt to arrive at a definition of what public is. The suggestion I will make is that the term public in its most relevant form only applies to a group of beholders who, as a result of current circumstances, find themselves within the same network as the artwork. That these circumstances should be current, is a result of the idea that these networks only hold out as long as there is a relevant urgency.

As I delved deeper into this, the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern in London was a willing subject for closer inspection. An obvious choice, as the space, besides having a museum function, also has the characteristics of a street or a square. In an article about this space and the Unilever Series in it, Wouter Davidts illustrates the dual function of this huge space with several quotations. These make clear that the space is so impressive that large groups of people come to see it. At the same time, the space remains inviting and affords the institute an opportunity to lure the newcomers into visiting the collection as well. In addition, because the floor gently slopes down from the entrance inward, one is almost literally drawn into the space and encouraged to explore it. The architectural critic Rowan Moore is quoted with his argument that the space maintains a strong public character because it is not directive in how it should be experienced. Moore considers this an important value in a time when the market is increasingly taking over public space.² These public characteristics are enhanced by the fact that one doesn't need to buy an admission ticket to enter the space. The scale of the hall—and how this scale is designed—is therefore one of the finds in the design that is greatly appreciated. The space partly functions as a public part of the city while still remaining part of the museum. This makes it a fine example of a place where different codes can coexist and perhaps even intermingle. One can definitely expect art in this space, but because of its public character the rules of the museum do not yet fully prevail.

Davidts 2007, p. 1.

During my research I chanced upon a photograph of *Up Hill, Down Hall. An Indoor Carnival*, from 2014. With this crossing of a performance and carnival celebration, curator Claire Tancons attempted to create more awareness of the potential of carnival as a medium. Tancons herself called it a 'mass public processional performance'. She admits that it is a mouthful, but it is clear that it includes a task for the visitor. When it comes down to it, Tancons wanted to make clear that this *Indoor Carnival* is not what one

would normally expect at Tate.³ And that is perhaps an apt description of what the photograph seems to say. We see a group of performers—recognizable by their clearly different attire and attributes—standing within a circle of bystanders. This is a quite common phenomenon. When a performer is doing tricks with a football or plays an impressive drum solo on pots and pans in the Dam Square in Amsterdam, a loose circle of bystanders almost spontaneously forms around what there is to see. Everyone keeps their due distance, leaving a space that is claimed by the street performer. However, a closer look at the photograph reveals that the space in which these performers are was not formed spontaneously, in this case. A number of employees are holding a rope, delineating a place, which is probably required for the group of performers to execute their choreography properly. So the museum is actively taking on the role of guardian of the structure intended by the artist or curator or that the organization itself prefers to maintain. When we apply Laerman's term 'experience ability' here, we see that the potential of the knowledge that is present within the group has little or no possibility of becoming *specific*. Those standing behind the rope are more likely to adopt the attitude of beholder of an artwork—as



Marlon Griffith, *No Black in the Union Jack*, 2014. Part of 'BMW Tate Live: Up Hill Down Hall: An Indoor Carnival', Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom, documentation. Photo by Akiko Ota, 2014.

they are used to doing in a museum—then to participate in the 'processional performance'. In other words, the specificity of the task facing those present in the Turbine Hall can hardly become manifest anymore, because of this artificial barrier. One could say that the bystanders in this case remain exactly that: bystanders, as the public that Tancons is aiming for, is simply not formed. Obviously this photograph is not a complete representation of the work, or event. Still, it does bring across much of the information one also encounters as a visitor when seeing a work or a situation for the first time. And exactly this information contains much of what can become a gap, or not. Of what, in the end, makes a group of people become a public, or not.

Lines and Collective Systems

So, my suggestion is to look at what functioning is decisive in applying the term 'public'. When does the specific community we could describe as public originate, and for how long does it exist? For me personally, the image of the floor of the school gym comes to mind. It is a somewhat simplified image but it still provides some grip on the rather abstract image of these situations. As in most school gyms, the floor of the one in my old school had a pattern consisting of numerous lines in various colours and shapes. It was a complex system that did not immediately appear logical to the untrained eye. Still, once it is explained to us, we know that different lines are used in different games. We then select only the information we need and ignore the rest. Obviously, this floor reflects a number of systems that are already present. But there was a time when all these games were played on an unmarked floor. Those who were actually playing the games decided upon the lines and rules that were required to give the game a permanent form. The lines make sure that the system can be communicated and remain active. When we apply this to the public of an artwork in public space, the moment of origination and the lifespan of the specific community arise from a complex