

## Art as Encounter

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A number of artists today set out to create no more artworks. Instead they want to get out of the museum, and provoke modifications of the space of everyday life, giving rise to new forms of relations.

– Jacques Rancière, 2006<sup>1</sup>

### The Courage to Act

In December 2015, SIGN, a project space for young, experimental interdisciplinary art in Groningen, hosted a series of presentations concerning the projects that were being developed in the context of the Parrhesia programme. Parrhesia is part of the Being Political research lab of the research group Image in Context of Academie Minerva in Groningen. The invited artists and designers<sup>2</sup> had been challenged to connect the parrhesiast's brave position to their own work in day-long debate sessions a few months earlier. In his last lecture series (1983–1984) the philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984) worked with this Greek concept, which directly opposes the notion of rhetoric. Where the rhetoric speaker strategically aims to win the public over, the parrhesiast always speaks the inconvenient truth, regardless of the public's reaction.

A group of students and alumni<sup>3</sup> presented the installation *The Wheel of Fortune*, in which they asked several people in the audience to join them and answer a series of confrontational questions in complete honesty (one question was, for example, what the boundaries are between art and life). In other words, they asked the audience to have the courage to tell the truth arising from the concept of parrhesia. To underline that the conversation was not meant to consist of small talk but was rather a ritual deliberately placed in the artistic space, two of them were dressed as businessmen and two others wore robes that alluded to Greek antiquity. According to the participating students the business suits referred to the financial transactions that surround spiritual practices. The artists in robes invited the members of the audience to a tent to give them a hand massage.<sup>4</sup> In order to get the spectators to drop their passive role and to challenge them to express the bond that had developed between artists and spectators, the students asked the participants for a reciprocating act, in the form of honest answers, in exchange for the services rendered.<sup>5</sup>

In this essay I will discuss the specific nature of this type of art practices. In these practices the artists and their publics are moving away from the more traditional relationship in which artists merely display their art in museums or public spaces. They consist of intimate and personal processes made possible by the grace of the artistic space that is separating itself from the coded space around it. In these practices the public takes on a different role than that of the passive spectator. The involvement of the public in what art is and can be becomes part of the experience. This turns art into something to be a part of rather than something that is simply handed over to you. More specifically, these art practices allow for a time and site specific situated form of co-ownership, through which the artistic environment created by the artist becomes the condition for experiencing new ideas and insights. In relation to theatre, the French philosopher Jacques Rancière (1940–) writes in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2015) about 'theatre without spectators, where those in attendance learn from as opposed to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs' (Rancière, 2009a, p. 4). These practices are not new. New is perhaps the shift of focus from public participation in processes of interaction towards developing a theatrical space that not only makes other types of expression possible, but also takes on other roles and with that, other perspectives. This notion will therefore be the main focus of this text. Whereas Jacques Rancière talks about the aesthetic space (Rancière,

2004) because of its emphasis on the distribution of the sensible (*le partage du sensible*), in the case of situated art I'd rather speak of the theatrical or artistic space, indicating a space that corresponds to the domain of the arts. But one can also speak of a staged space, a space that has been constructed and is thus able to separate itself from the space around it. In any case, it is important that this space not only mobilizes the senses but also *the will to act*. The art students and alumni resort to the dramatization of the space for a reason. It is done in order to turn spectators into participants who are willing to act, or better yet, have the courage to act, because as Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) stressed in *The Human Condition* (1958), not only is performing an act the most human activity but also the most uncertain. In performing an act man sets something in motion that he does not completely control. Before it was made clear that *The Wheel of Fortune* was to become a truth-telling experience the students asked the visitors to take on a position within the theatrical setting they had created. This required a certain kind of seduction. In this sense, the students understood that situated art projects are founded in the spectator's courage to act.

What is essential in situated art practices is what is taking place on site. Art only becomes a situated practice when the audience enters the space and participates. Of course, it could be said that this notion differs only slightly from traditionally exhibited art and that a piece of art put on display only comes into being when beheld and given meaning by the spectator. The difference therefore concerns only the physical presence of the artist and thus the shift from watching to acting and participating. Yet the difference between the call from a passively displayed piece of art, which is easily dismissed, and the call from a physically present artist who takes you through a process you cannot escape from halfway through, is undeniable. In situated art practices there is a clear sense of a greater degree of interdependence between artist and participant. Because of the request that is made of the acting spectator there is the need for a relatively protected intimacy, a secure publicness in which only the eyes of the other participants and bystanders are present.

### **The Fierce Light of the Public Media**

In the struggle between exhibition art that requires no action and creates spectators, and situated art practices that create a different space in which participants are encouraged to act, the public media take up different positions as reactants. The presentation of exhibition art in museums or public areas is usually accompanied by strongly influencing media coverage. Let it be clear that no one enters an artistically coded space as a blank page without any expectations, same as with stepping into a space where a situated art practice is taking place. No one was surprised or shocked to be asked by artists to become involved in an art practice in SIGN gallery. The media coverage, however, largely created and programmed the expectations of the future public. The reports not only brought the exhibition to the attention of the reader, but also affected the way the specific works were experienced, which is in turn part of the idea constructed by the same media about what art should be. This does not mean that quality cannot come across and be experienced by those affected, but it does mean that spontaneous occurrences in the encounter between art and audience are less likely to happen, and might even disappear when we let ourselves be guided by the media and that which it shines its very decisive light on. Tino Sehgal, an artist operating in the Stedelijk Museum in 2015, seems to be well aware of this. He confirms the influence of the media by prohibiting the museum to advertise for his projects. In his journal on the website of the museum, art lawyer Aernoud Bourdrez explains Sehgal's defiance as a refusal to let the world of systems enter the world in which we live. Sehgal rejected 'advertising which, with the use of innovative laws in the marketing world, could have created high expectations and lured me inside. I saw no catalogue, with which I could

have placed Sehgal's work in a museum context. I have no commercial connotation because the prices are not discussed. There are no explanatory labels in the hall that can tell me what collection the work belongs to and by which I could place the work within the context of the art world.<sup>6</sup> The result is that the unprepared spectator is more or less taken by surprise by Sehgal's performances and that, besides the knowledge that the already educated observer has of performance art, only that single performance can be of reference to others. The performances were not signified in advance. Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen, curator of the exhibition:

His work only exists during the moment the visitor enters the museum space and must relate to one of his 'situations'. That is when it happens. Once you leave the room it is gone. It is a totally unique and individual experience at a very specific moment.<sup>7</sup>

In our mediatized society the light of the public—a notion Hannah Arendt explains in *The Human Condition*—has become the fierce light of the media. 'That which is public' no longer means to exist in public in the eyes of the other but to become visible in the eyes of the media. Situated art attempts to dim the media's light in favour of the view of the other.

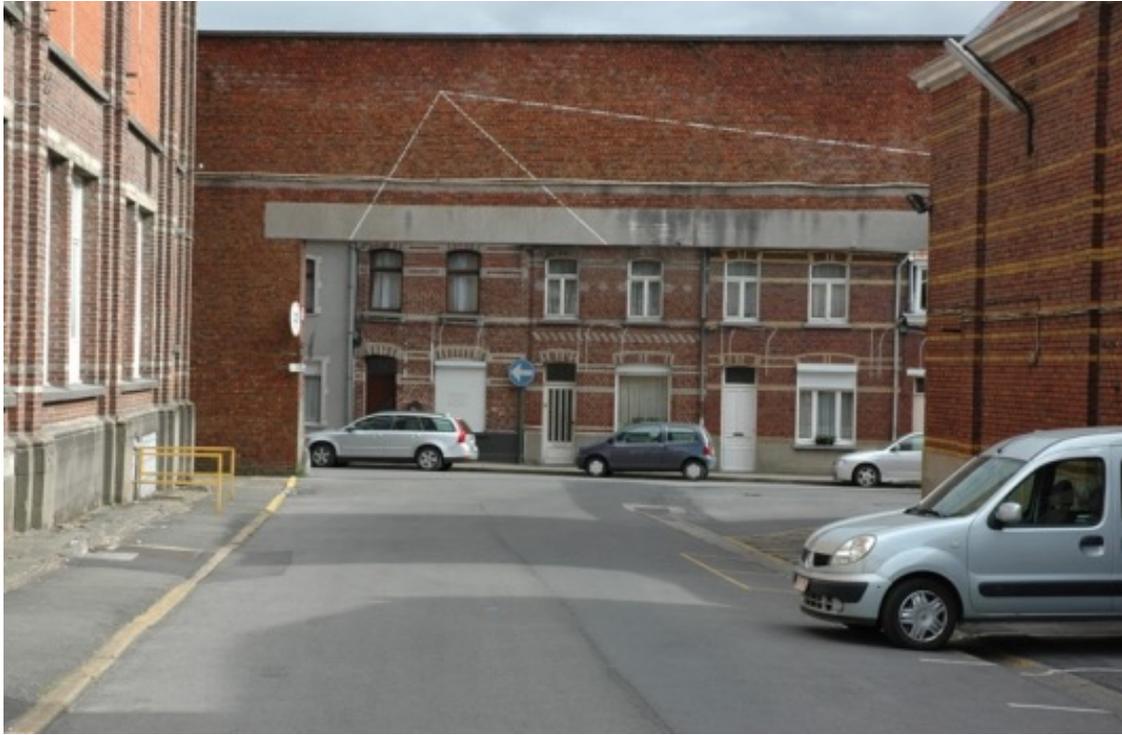
The existence of situated art practices is crucial in light of creating a different artistic environment that is located primarily outside of the media. The examples described here provide the context of a museum or gallery in which a shift from looking to acting and from giving meaning to participating is taking place. In the next part of this essay I want to discuss how these practices become artistic spaces in themselves that influence the social spaces around them. The space that has been coded by the arts provides an even sharper contrast to the socially coded spaces surrounding it. This results in the involvement of people who do not directly belong to the inner-circle audiences of the arts within different local contexts. Because they become part of an artistic process they get to experience, perhaps for the first time, what art truly is. I would like to describe this as a different time-space that embeds itself within the space of normal, everyday occurrences, and in those spaces makes other forms of experiencing, other perspectives of meaning, and other perspectives of action possible. Not the physical creation of art but the development of an environment in which art can come into being in other ways and in new relationships with the public is inherent to the type of projects described here.

### **Productive Interaction with the Common Public Space**

In the example of the Parrhesia project there is, as stated before, already an art environment (the gallery) within which the group develops its own space. The same can be seen in Tino Sehgal's projects in the Stedelijk Museum. He also created his own space within the museum in which a form of interaction with the public could take place other than the passive interaction between the spectator and beheld artwork.

In many other situated art projects the artistic space is being positioned within public areas of social interaction. This creates a form of synergy between the two differently charged areas. Whereas Nicolas Bourriaud placed emphasis on the origination of the social space as an artistic space and on how the social space invades the artistic space, in his influential work *Esthétique relationnelle (Relational Aesthetics)*<sup>8</sup> in 1998, I want to examine how the artistic space arises from within the social space and also the interaction between these two domains. Or, in other words, where in the relational aesthetics the social space becomes an artistic space, this essay investigates the interaction between the two domains and the interplay through the implantation of the one space within the other. They question each other. The interaction affects both

the autonomous area of the arts, the place where art only relates to itself, and the heteronomous spaces in which non-artistic, social processes take place. Some examples may serve to illustrate the interactions between the ordinary world and art that are transforming art because of how the ordinary world is entering it. The ordinary world is undergoing a similar change as art is in turn implanting itself in it.



ill. 1

Commissioned by several arts organizations and municipalities, artist Bart Lodewijks has been exploring neighbourhoods and districts throughout the world for many years. By applying chalk he transforms the neighbourhood into a temporary artwork—the influence of the artistic space on the public space. Yet his works can only ‘become’ if the neighbourhood is willing to cooperate. The residents must give their permission to let the artist draw on their homes. And so he draws his way from the centre spot of the football field, and on through the street, on terraced houses, Art Deco houses, and the side of a Moroccan teahouse. Finally, he manages to have his aesthetic domain enter the homes of the people. He wrote about the process in his essay *Heimwee naar krijt* (‘Homesick for chalk’): ‘A line is the shortest connection between two points, similar to a footstep. On foot you can get almost anywhere. I’ve been trying to get everywhere by drawing’ (Lodewijks, 2014, p. 119). However, the influence of the social space on the space of art goes beyond giving consent. That is to say, an essential part of Lodewijks’ art practice is his conversation with the local residents. As they become part of his work, he becomes part of their community through listening to their stories. He comes to the neighbourhood with chalk and leaves it with stories (Ill. 1).

This project is somewhat similar to *Academy of the People*, a project created by artist Jonas Staal and students from Academy Minerva, in 2013. In this project, an artistic strategy of art exchange was developed. This strategy consisted of the students reaching out to what were to them foreign organizations or institutions, and propose a form of art exchange to them. These organizations and institutions included the police station, Ikea, a synagogue, and an IT company. Students brought a context-specific work of art into the chosen institutions, and in turn the partner organization temporarily placed an artwork in the Groninger Museum. The proposed exchange was attractive to

the partner organizations because they could now temporarily place something within the temple of art. In turn, they let students create contextualized art and place it within the organization. While the artworks that the organizations chose for the museum were fairly obvious paintings, the students wanted to make visible what was art to them in relation to the organizations. One student made an installation at the police station of all the belongings that were stolen from him in the past. Furthermore, he asked for the ritual punishment of spending one night in a cell. Another student put statues he made in the Ikea with a price tag. Because Ikea did not want to collaborate, he put Ikea's best-selling 'painting' in the Groninger Museum: the rose. A third student created an artwork in the synagogue that consisted of several holy books referring to one another. The most radical work was that of a student who chose to convert to Islam after a couple of conversations with believers as a means to enter the time-space of Islam as an artist. From then on any work she would create could automatically be placed within that context. Through these interventions in non-artistic spaces, the students used situated art to directly include people who normally might not go to the museum in what art could be: another view on a supposedly self-evident practice. The project was concluded with a series of conversations about each other's understanding of art at the Groninger Museum. The contextual art the students had made was part of an artistic exchange, a reciprocal action. The artists made the organizations part of a broader artistic discourse that both contextual art and exhibition art were a part of (ill. 2).



ill.2

## **Redefining the Art Process**

In the third example, something else occurred besides the interaction between the artist and the social context: the artist redefined his or her practice of being an artist through working with a model that was not able to be a model. In 2011 the project *Ik zie ik zie wat jij niet ziet* (I see, I see, what you can't see) took place in Blauwbörgje, a home for people with dementia in Groningen. The ten students that applied for this project were each to portray a person with dementia in the common rooms of the institution. The process was guided by visual artist Herman van Hoogdalem. Before the project, Hoogdalem had always made a clear separation between his work as a teacher at the academy and his work as an artist, in which he created, amongst other things, large paintings of people with dementia.<sup>9</sup> This project allowed him to bring both aspects together. He let the students enter the world he knew as an artist and granted them the same kind of encounter he had experienced. He knew that the human relationship would profoundly affect the artistic relationship in this process. Students at an art school are familiar with the classic practice of drawing from a model, which then results in a portrait that can be exhibited. The paid models take on a coded position as an object to be used for art. They agree that their physical characteristics and appearance might be transformed by the artist in order to create the work the artist has in mind. The model is the motivation. The artist is the directive. These are two agreed upon positions. The model gets paid. The artist gets an image.

However, when the drawing takes place within a social context in which it is impossible to objectify the model, the student has no choice but to adopt a different attitude. There is no posing to speak of, if only for the reason that it is unclear whether a person with dementia can and wants to take up this position or not. Frequently, the students were sent away because the model did not feel like it that day. In addition, it is impossible to objectify a person with dementia because, depending on which stage they are in, they cannot or only partially succeed in doing this themselves. A very human aspect breaks into the realm of the artistic practice precisely because a person with dementia possesses a kind of honesty that is foreign to other people. However, sometimes this honesty results in a kind of response that evokes so much embarrassment that the individual must be clearly distinguished from the disease. Yet most of the time honesty remains the decisive factor: what you see is what you get. At least, when the model is truly looked at. And that is something these art students are very good at. Because they have such an open and attentive attitude, the students get to see what no other model could reveal. This is moving, confusing, and creates a big responsibility, especially in dealing with that which borders on embarrassment. And of course the question for whom the students are making these portraits keeps coming up. For themselves, because they are allowed to witness something extraordinary? For the world, because they show a special image of dementia? And how could it benefit the model? This dilemma haunts them, and rightly so. To portray people with dementia means to be in a continuous state of doubt. What do you make visible and to whom?

The art students were fully aware of the shift that occurred within the artistic space created here. They understood that these people were not traditional models, or educational objects that could be used to make beautiful pictures, nor were they clients, but people who could only have an impact on the creation of the portrait through the physical encounter and the human interaction. That is exactly why the students placed themselves across from the person they were appointed to. They sought the encounter, with the portrait as an alibi and outcome. They were not the ones leading the process, the person in front of them was. Because of the art students' open attitude they were able to see what the person with dementia wanted to reveal to them, and another form of portraiture could thus emerge. The encounter between the artist and the person with dementia provided the material for the portrait. The students responded to the

unforeseen statements and movements of the person with dementia. While the artistic space that surrounds a person with dementia makes an encounter possible, it is the freedom and space that a person with dementia takes that establishes it. A person with dementia guarantees the unexpected, the new, and the different, to which the artist has learned to be open.

Saskia is impressed by the first meeting with her model. He speaks to her as if she is a garage owner and wants to sell her his car. Following the advice of the Blauwbörgje's employees, she decides not to go against it. Every week he gives her a different role. The last role she also decides to go along with is the role of his wife. 'Bye sweetheart, 'till next time...' She starts writing. A series of concise, sharp stories are created in this way. Saskia discovers that she can write and that she can combine this newfound ability with her drawings.<sup>10</sup>

One of the other students explains:

I find it so painful to see how she talks, but that nobody is listening. There are eight people in the living room, she is sitting in the middle of it and the others are completely ignoring her. So I decide to listen to her attentively. She talks about the chair she is sitting in, it is an important object from her past. I make a drawing of the chair and give it to her. Two weeks later I come into the room and she asks if I want to sit in her chair. She has pinned the drawing to the wall. She moves me, I realize that I'm a lot like her, I'm not a social creature, and when I draw her now, I create more and more space around her. She is alone.<sup>11</sup>

The artistic space creates the possibility to view not just the person with dementia differently, but also of their surroundings. The presence of the students and the space created by portraying them breaks into the institution's public domain, in which social interaction is dominated by the capabilities of the person with dementia (ill. 3).



ill. 3

### **The Useless, Fragile and Non-productive Space**

The artistic enters the space of dementia's institutional care context even more than it enters its social environment. The project took place within the context of an institution that works according to a functionality and protocol that have their roots in economic principles; the so-called system world of Habermas in which all actions are both strategical and instrumental. Not the encounter as an uncertain act, but caring for as a goal-oriented action is the institutional maxim for the caretakers. Within this environment, a space was introduced in which different principles prevailed. In a lecture in 2006, Jacques Rancière spoke of the importance of spaces and places that are—in the words of the artists of *Campement urbain*—‘extremely useless, fragile and non-productive’.<sup>12</sup> He used a project by a group of French artists who call themselves *Campement urbain* to illustrate this. The group created a silent space in one of the most notorious neighbourhoods of Paris. Only one person at a time could sit in this quiet room, and therefore this person was, for a moment, alone but also connected to others. For this reason the artists called the project *I and Us (Moi et Nous)*. The importance of these kinds of spaces lies in the fact that they create both the possibility of being separated from and connected to their environments. In these spaces something other may occur that could affect the space that surround them. In the project discussed in Rancière's lecture the solitary meditation resulted in choosing a statement that was subsequently propagated by printing it on a T-shirt. In *I see, I see what you can't see* a different kind of silent space of reflection was created within the functional space of taking care of people. Students took the caretakers and relatives along in their alternate way of looking at the person with dementia. A kind of silence and meditation arose that bore similarities to the experience of sitting in the silent room in Rancière's example. The student's view can influence the onlooker's view even before the portrait is displayed and hangs on the wall of the Blauwbörgje as exhibition art. The artistic space starts with how the students see their surroundings and the drawings they create as a result. The interaction took place in how the artistic view and the view from outside of art intersect and question each other during the extensive discussion sessions that were held every week after working on the portraits. It is great that after these sessions there was an exhibition with portraits that provided several personal views of people with dementia, and that they were not just seen as a group with a disease, but as individuals who, from their unorthodox behaviours and the free space they naturally occupy, are able to reveal something other than what we already know. The actual work, however, was already done by then.

Just as in the *Academy of the People* project and Bart Lodewijks' work, a different perspective emerged in *I see, I see what you can't see*. There was room for entirely new conversations that are just as important as the resulting image, which raises the question of what actually is the artistic work. I would say it is the total of the artistic act and the artistic product that, through its exhibition, becomes a type of act on its own. If there is such a thing as a 'public', it is involved in both the creation of the images and in their exposition. The portraits of *I see, I see* were exhibited at the academy as well as at the institution, and the variety of portraits provided the public with many opportunities to assimilate a different image of dementia. Hannah Arendt's description of the public space as the space of a variety of perspectives (Arendt, 1958, p. 57, 58) is reflected in this project because ten portrait sessions were taking place simultaneously.

## Conclusion

Art is able to situate itself into life's daily affairs not just as a product or an image, but also as an artistic space in which a different practice and attitude become visible. Artists settle there and it is their presence, their view, and their manner of acting that make it an artistic visual space. The projects described here are small, intimate projects that foreground the exchange between people, not the presentation to the general public. The

public, the other person, is involved in the realization of the artwork from the beginning. In that sense, the projects could be called ‘encounter art’ as discussed in *Relational Aesthetics*. The interaction with the audience is part of the artwork and/or the artistic practice. However (and here I believe is where the practice differs from Rancière’s example of *Campement urbain*), the artist retains control over his artistic process. The artistic process has moved from the studio, the traditional site of creation, to society, or rather to concrete contexts with specific publics: the local residents, the shoppers at Ikea, the officers at the police station, and the people living in the healthcare facility. Yet art is a catalyst that manages to draw the public into a space in which the non-productive, the fragile, and the useless call the shots. The artistic process has thus become an artistic research process that examines new possibilities together with the other.

Ill. 1 Bart Lodewijks, *Ronse*, 2011

Ill. 2 Jimi Kleinbruinink, *Statue for Ikea*, Groningen 2013

Ill. 3 Maroussia Jansen, *Portrait of Woman with Dementia*, 2014

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/ranciere.html#\\_ftn1](http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/ranciere.html#_ftn1).

<sup>2</sup> Participating artists and designers were Woodstone Kugelblitz, Yuri Veerman, Katja Verheul, DesignArbeid, Roel Roscam Abbing, Sulsalsal, Gijs de Heij en Eleni Kamma.

<sup>3</sup> Bernardo Zanotta, Anna Ehmen, Anna Rijkens, Nia Konstantinova.

<sup>4</sup> Nia Konstantinova explained: ‘The very spiritual happened when we realized that these people are stepping out of their comfort zone and it was up to us to create another one which gives them space to both think on the previous conversation but also relax and connect with us. The whole scenery was lit by a light, meant for art therapy which connected our spiritual moment to the machines that we surround ourselves with and the artificial places for sanctuary that are so common today (churches, temples, graves are also artificial sanctuaries).’ (Source: email exchange)

<sup>5</sup> In Nia Konstantinova’s words: ‘We wanted to provoke the dislocation of the spectator from his passive and inoperative role, which is usually what happens, and be able to create a certain affinity that existed only in that moment in between us and the people who participated.’ (Source: email exchange)

<sup>6</sup> <http://journal.stedelijk.nl/sehgal-en-het-betreden-van-de-leefwereld-2/#more-6276>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://journal.stedelijk.nl/sehgal-en-het-betreden-van-de-leefwereld-2/#more-6276>.

<sup>8</sup> Bourriaud 2002.

<sup>9</sup> His best-known works can be found in Wanders 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Observation Herman van Hoogdalem.

<sup>11</sup> From a conversation between a student and Herman van Hoogdalem. See also: <http://kc.academiminerva.nl/media/17367>.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/politics-aesthetics>.