

# Art and Public Space: The Question of Artistic Publicness\*

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## Introduction

This article deals with the ambivalent relationship between art and public space. On the one hand, art is seen as a human expression which awards public spaces with precious insights. On the other hand, it is said, is art – especially public art – more and more encapsulated by the hegemony of big institutional players. The question arises how art can stay relatively independent while remaining publicly influential. In other words, how to define art's position in public space?

Some say that a solution to the above dilemma is to *challenge* powerful social hierarchies. Because artists are worried that art is getting trapped between commercialism and state patronage, an *agonistic* approach to art in public space is seen as the only way out. Unravelling the structure of knotted power might turn art into a new counter culture; and in a time of raging global capitalism, many would welcome this.

I have reservations about the agonist conception of public space, however, and will propose an alternative conception. In my opinion the power of art in public space lies in its capacity to create *a sense of publicness*, that is, to suggest through its very particularity a connection between the addressee's aesthetic impressions and his or her ideas of the world at large. If an art work succeeds in evoking a sense of publicness, it might create a public space among its audience. In any case, art has no obligation to entertain a *political* commitment.

I will explain this thesis by comparing different conceptions of public space, but will concentrate on the agonist conception, since it has become rather influential in current discourses about art and public space – not in the least concerning the debate about art and *de Amsterdamse Zuidas*.

## Documenta 12: aesthetic challenge or perverse conservatism?

If something was absent in this year's documenta 12, it was rhetorical and visual bombast. Some even complained about the lack of thematic and literary direction whilst visiting the

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exhibition. Documenta 12 caused confusion and a loss of direction. Especially the Aue-Pavillion – a huge glass house construction with metallic curtains and brown floors – was an unwelcome place, it was said, a place where orientation was annoyingly difficult.<sup>1</sup>

Although I had the same experience, initially, I started to appreciate the in the Aue-Pavillion inside absence of preordained destinations and museological contextualizations. It took some effort to accept the criss-cross positioning of the art objects, but ultimately it was challenging to be thrown back on just observing, thinking, memorizing, and associating. The horizontal architecture of the pavillion forced the visitor to concentrate on the works of art themselves, and to make the connections himself. The visual result was a wandering attendance that was magically blended with the works of art.

I guess that a visit to documenta 12 gave way to the sensation that director Roger M. Buergel and curator Ruth Noack had in mind by creating its “inherent formlessness.”<sup>2</sup> to invite visitors to choose their own path. In Buergel’s portrayal: “They tend to feel the challenge deeply and they counter this challenge by seeking for identity. But how does one keep the balance between identification and fixation? Art can teach us that discipline. [...] This is aesthetic experience in its true sense: the exhibition becomes a medium in its own right and can thus hope to involve its audience in its compositional moves.”<sup>3</sup> Not the form of the exhibition itself but the form of its art was to the concern of Buergel and Noack. After a barrage of political engagement during the former documenta, they choose to let art speak for itself. A rather daring gesture; to reposition art in the center of attention and see how it speaks of the world.

Documenta 11 was different. There the message outweighed the medium. Not art itself but the socio-political context in which art operated stood at the forefront – in the words of director Okwui Enwezor “yet another turbulent time of unceasing cultural, social, and political frictions, transitions, transformations, fissures, and global institutional consolidations.”<sup>4</sup> How art was supposed to deal with this constellation was documenta 11’s question. It was, Enwezor wrote, the “challenge of making meaningful articulation of the possibilities of contemporary art in such a climate, as well as the disciplinary, spatial, temporal, and historical pressures to which it has been subjected, represent the diagnostic, deliberative process out of

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Janneke Wesseling (2007) “Een gat in de ruit,” and Holland Cotter (2007) “Asking Serious Questions in a Very Quiet Voice.”

<sup>2</sup> Roger M. Buergel and Ruth Noack (2007) “Preface,” p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-12.

which the full measure of documenta 11 has been engaged .”<sup>5</sup> Documenta 11 burdened art with politics. Art had to render account of its message. “In the democratic system,” Enwezor stated, “the demands of citizenship place strong ethical constraints on the artist, based on his or her commitment to all ‘forms of life.’ The practice of art presents the artist with the task of making such commitment.”<sup>6</sup> Enwezor only saw two courses for art to steer: clear of, or towards politics. Yet, in effect the former option is out of this world, it is “not only perversely conservative but, more importantly, misunderstands the *nature of the critical energy* that drives the conditions of artistic production [...]”<sup>7</sup>

Buergel and Noacks’s intention has been somewhat more laid-back than Enwezor’s almost aggressive stand.<sup>8</sup> Instead of focusing on today’s world wide web of complexities – art’s inescapable theater – they have taken a big step back by posing the classic art question of the “internal dynamic destinies of form.”<sup>9</sup> Thinking of documenta 12, Buergel said, he wanted to be *idiotic*: acknowledging his ignorance, and moving away from the burden of current public conventions.<sup>10</sup> “Wir vertrauen der Kunst”<sup>11</sup> is a remark that stands in sharp contrast to Enwezor’s skeptical idea of artistic commitment.

### **Modernity and three conceptions of public space**

To be sure, though, the idea that art needs to challenge the political status quo is quite a popular thought today, but in my opinion in need for some serious assessment. Why should artists have to think of their art as stemming from a political disposition? And even regarding *public* art, why does it have to be activist and critical in order to be called truly public? Below I will compare several conceptions of public space and thereby hope to illustrate that these assumptions are not satisfactory.

We could say that ever since Beethoven – while having a walk with Goethe – decided *not* to bow for the approaching Archduke Rudolph,<sup>12</sup> the discourse about the arts changed into

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<sup>4</sup> Okwui Enwezor (2002) “Preface,” p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Okwui Enwezor (2002) “The Black Box,” p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 53, my italics.

<sup>8</sup> In his introduction to *Platform I\_Documenta 11: Democracy Unrealized*, Enwezor does not mention art once. Elsewhere he states: “To understand what constitutes the avant-garde today, one must begin not in the field of contemporary art but in the field of culture and politics, as well as in the economic field governing all relations that have come under the overwhelming hegemony of capital.” Enwezor, “The Black Box,” p. 45.

<sup>9</sup> Buergel and Noack, “Preface,” p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Buergel in: Hanno Rauterberg (2007) “Revolte in Kassel.”

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> As Ludwig van Beethoven explained in a letter to Bettina Brettano in 1812. In: R. Rolland (1948) *Het leven van Beethoven* [The Life of Beethoven], p. 36.

the question about art's meaning for free citizens. Or as Robert Hughes has put it: "The idea of a cultural *avant-garde* was unimaginable before 1800. It was fostered by the rise of liberalism. Where the taste of religious or secular courts determined patronage, "subversive innovation" was not esteemed as a sign of artistic quality."<sup>13</sup> Beethoven undoubtedly represented this subversive innovative spirit<sup>14</sup> as he was all but obedient to political power. Beethoven was a democrat<sup>15</sup> and personified a new kind of freedom, namely to be free in one's artistic creations *from* political directives.

However, modern artistic freedom also raised the question about its *public* implications – what was it *for*? As the sovereign became a public, an open discussion about art's quality was inevitable. A public sphere in the world of art emerged,<sup>16</sup> with the salon as its central place.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, the discussion about the public meaning of art has never stopped, and especially today, during a time of great international turbulence, this discussion is seen as more critical than ever to hold.

At present agonist theory is influential in explaining art's role in public space. An important defender of this theory is Chantal Mouffe, whose writings (together with Ernesto Laclau) have unmistakably helped to prepare documenta 11's conceptual framework.<sup>18</sup> According to Mouffe the prime function of art in public space is to radicalize democracy, to bring into the open the inherent power struggles of society. Public acts should challenge and agonize hegemonic interests. This proposal arises from Mouffe's basic belief that "[a]ny social objectivity is constituted through acts of power. This means that any social objectivity is ultimately political and has to show the traces of the acts of exclusion that govern its constitution [...]."<sup>19</sup> Hence, public space is the domain in which we need to transform

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Hughes (1980, 1993) *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change*, p. 372.

<sup>14</sup> "Kings and Princes may install learned men and secret councils; and bestow them with titles and knighthoods; they cannot produce great men, giant minds that rise above the world's muck." Beethoven in: Rolland, *Leven van Beethoven*, p. 36, my translation.

<sup>15</sup> Recall the 'Eroica tale': Beethoven originally dedicated his Third Symphony 'Eroica' to Napoleon but later removed his name from the front page when Napoleon proclaimed himself emperor.

<sup>16</sup> Magnificently set out by Habermas. See: Jürgen Habermas (1962, 1996) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*.

<sup>17</sup> "The bourgeois audience did not invent the salon but it did create the permissions within which the artistic variety that the salon, by 1820, had come to express could ferment an *avant-garde*." Hughes, *Shock of the New*, p. 373.

<sup>18</sup> Her article "For an Agonistic Public Sphere" was published in the book *Platform 11\_Documenta 11: Democracy Unrealized*.

<sup>19</sup> Chantal Mouffe (1996) "Democracy, Power, and the 'Political'," p. 247. See also Chantal Mouffe (2000) *The Democratic Paradox*, p. 98.

antagonistic power relations into agonist relations: “*Antagonism* is struggle between enemies, while *agonism* is struggle between adversaries.”<sup>20</sup>

The idea of agonism goes back to the late 1950s. It was the time of intense emancipatory impulses (e.g. existentialism, Beat Generation, feminism) and in art of the rise of the “neo-avant garde”<sup>21</sup>. The general worry of artists and intellectuals was the *disappearance* of public space, be it in relation to artistic innovation, democratic legitimacy, or public morals. The creation of a counter culture was needed, vital to shake off the tarnished legacy of Western bourgeois culture (capitalism, universalism, neo-colonialism, etc.). The term ‘agonist’ stems from Hannah Arendt, who was deeply inspired by Greek publicness, which she characterised as “a fiercely agonal spirit.”<sup>22</sup> Greek publicness was a manifestation of individuality and particularity, a result of the belief that “man is capable of action [and] that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitively improbable.”<sup>23</sup> Arendt formulated her agonist conception of public space as an alternative to the dominant liberal conception of public space, characterized by a *technocratic* idea of politics, on the one hand, and a *materialistic* understanding of interests and ideas that were exchanged in public, on the other. The idea that a political elite, being democratically elected, could wisely *aggregate* the preferences of the people,<sup>24</sup> was increasingly seen as a false neutralization of the political status-quo. The public was made private as it were, being left out of political decisions that surely were of its concern. Democratic politics could not be limited to the occasional voting of political representatives. A strong democratization was called for which needed to take place through a *political* injection of public space.

However, next to agonist theory, another political alternative to the aggregative approach was formulated during the early 1960s: deliberative theory, represented by Jürgen Habermas.<sup>25</sup> Instead of Arendt’s expressivist solution Habermas wanted to improve public space by rational deliberation and communication. The object was to reach rational consensus about the core values of democratic politics. So, while Arendt returned to the classical ideal of

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<sup>20</sup> “[An adversary is] somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put in question.” Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, p. 102.

<sup>21</sup> Hal Foster (1996) *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, pp. 3 ff.

<sup>22</sup> Hannah Arendt (1958, 1998) *The Human Condition*, p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>24</sup> “The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will.” Joseph Schumpeter (1943, 1987) *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, p. 250.

<sup>25</sup> “Tendencies pointing to the collapse of the public sphere are unmistakable, for while its scope is expanding impressively, its function has become progressively insignificant.” Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, p. 4

public excellence, in order to reclaim public space, Habermas returned to the Enlightenment idea of public reason.

To be sure, Mouffe stresses that her theory breaks with Arendt's. She criticizes Arendt for being still too much influenced by Western universalism and for maintaining a liberal idea of diversity and plurality.<sup>26</sup> Mouffe, in contrast, proceeds from the idea of "the hegemonic nature of every form of consensus and the ineradicability of antagonism."<sup>27</sup> Because antagonism is part and parcel of contemporary societies, consensus will always be artificial, identities fluid, and instability forever present. Public space activity is therefore centred on challenging political dominance. And, by making "visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate," art can be of help with this assignment<sup>28</sup>

Now, it is important to stress that both the deliberative and agonist conception of public space see a close relation between politics and publicness. Despite their different intellectual background they both contemplate a political approach to public space. The important difference lies in their definition of the political *purpose* of public space.

According to deliberative theory it should be focused on a rational discussion based on democratic values (e.g. sincerity, truthfulness, equality) with the aim of reaching social consensus and harmony. Since the 1990s the deliberative approach to public space has revived and led to a wide array of communicative and interactionist art. This art is lead by the "ideal of social renewal by cultural challenge"<sup>29</sup> and often process-based: it examines whether its activities empower a democratic culture, whether they promote understanding, toleration, interculturality, etc. Jeroen Boomgaard has stressed the difference between the dominant agonist engagement of the 1960s and today's communicative engagement: "The basis for much committed action in public space is no longer the disruption of the system or the erosion of structure, but individual contact or interaction with a limited and clearly circumscribed group. The emphasis is on participation in everyday life, not on action that unmask everyday

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<sup>26</sup> "[Arendt] never acknowledges that this plurality is at the origin of antagonistic conflicts. According to Arendt, to think politically is to develop the ability to see things from a multiplicity of perspectives. [...] Despite significant differences between their respective approaches, Arendt, like Habermas, ends up envisaging the public space in a consensual way." See Chantal Mouffe (2007) "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces." See the parallel from an art historic perspective when Enwezor defends a third perspective of art, which he calls *postcoloniality*, next to modernism and avant-garde: "[I]n a sense, the avant-garde and formalist art [modernism, GD] share a common assumption in the completeness of their vision, which is to say: to secure the past and maintain tradition, or to depart vigorously from the past and renovate tradition."

<sup>27</sup> Mouffe, "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces." To be sure, I have strong doubts about Mouffe's interpretation of Arendt, but lack of space forces me to let this issue rest.

<sup>28</sup> Mouffe, "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces."

<sup>29</sup> Hughes, *Shock of the New*, p. 365.

and exposes the hypocrisy of power.”<sup>30</sup> Still, despite its communicative underpinning and consensualist intention the deliberative conception is fundamentally political. Its ideal-typical understanding of public space is democratic: it should be an open and dynamic space of human communication and interaction. This implies that its activities are to be normatively directed at transforming society in a democratic direction.<sup>31</sup>

To recap, whether deliberative or agonistic, both models believe that theorizing public space essentially is political, because it should democratically improve our conduct. Both schools have left the classical liberal public/private approach that started in Beethoven’s age, which said that there is a principal difference between politics and society, and that real freedom is located in the latter.

### **Introducing a fourth conception of public space**

I have strong reservations about a political characterization of public space, in general, and in relation to art, in particular. The very value of an artistic public space lies in the freedom not to think about political decision-making. It is nonsensical to demand of art democratic responsibility, to expect that it should determine its position regarding political issues.

Public space activities in general should be concerned much less with questions about policy-making, problem-solving, or stating, but rather with contemplating, comparing, and asking. The sensation of publicness, and what a public space should safeguard, does not lie at the end of the epistemic spectrum – politics – but at its very beginning; namely, with the imagination of subjective experience.

If we put the three conceptions of public space, that I have sketched above, in a scheme, my preferred conception of public space will become clear. A fourth conception of public space remains to be discussed.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Jeroen Boomgaard (2004) “The Platform of Commitment,” p. 46. Cf. Hal Foster’s idea of the ‘ethnographic turn’: “Only with the ethnographic turn in contemporary art and theory [...] is the turn from medium-specific elaborations [modernism] to debate-specific projects so pronounced.” Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. xi.

<sup>31</sup> For Dutch examples of communicative conceptions of public space see e.g. Henk Oosterling (2002) “Grootstedelijke reflecties: De verbeelding van de openbare ruimte,” p. 11; René Boomkens (1998) *Een drempelwereld: Moderne ervaring en stedelijke openbaarheid*, p. 53; Dennis Kaspori (2003) “Een communisme van ideeën: Naar een open source architectuurpraktijk.”

<sup>32</sup> I have analyzed these models of public space in relation to political theory in depth elsewhere: “Mind the Gap: Three Models of Democracy, One Missing; Two Political Paradigms, One Dwindling” (2007).

<i>Status</i>	NON-POLITICAL	POLITICAL
<i>Intention</i>		
RATIONALIST	Aggregative	Deliberative
ONTOLOGICAL	Civil	Agonist

#### Four conceptions of public space

The aggregative model – whose influence today is still widespread, of course – defines public space as an economical and technical way to optimally aggregate ideas and interests. The market is the prime mechanism to do this, because it is seen as a rational and fair device. Furthermore, according to this model public space is not specifically political because people’s interests are being defined and discussed in society itself. This makes the model unmistakably (neo)liberal. It stresses that, relatively independent from political decision-making, a wide array of non-political ways of human interaction exist (art, trade, industry etc.). It is the task of political institutions to rationally aggregate all these different preferences.

Although the deliberative model defines public space also as a rational mechanism, it is seen as distinctively political. Merely aggregating ideas and interests will not lead to legitimate democratic decisions. Social theorist Jon Elster has written: “The core of [deliberative] theory, then, is that rather than aggregating or filtering preferences, the political system should be set up with a view to changing them by public debate and confrontation.”<sup>33</sup> Reason should improve the democratic quality of society.

The agonist model shares with the deliberative model a political conception of public space; however, not with the intention to rationally discuss ideas and interests but to agonize them in order to lay bare their hidden power structure. This cannot be done rationalistic since to understand reality is, in Mouffe’s words, not to bring mere arguments and justifications to the fore but to especially acknowledge that power constitutes social reality. This is an ontological position (a conception of human reality) and stands at the basis of a political definition of public space.

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<sup>33</sup> Jon Elster (1986, 1997) “The Market and the Forum: Three Varieties of Political Theory,” p. 11.

Now, in line with the aggregative conception of public space, I argue for a *nonpolitical* conception of public space. I believe that publicness is in no way automatically political. I consider the difference between public space and politics as the essence of democracy, since it provides citizens – and not in the least artists – the freedom and opportunity to independently express their imagination, craft and intelligence. Therefore, I call it a civil conception of public space, because public space activities evolve around the independent institutionalization of civil society.<sup>34</sup>

Importantly, I share Mouffe’s critique of a rationalist portrayal of public space, and prefer an ontological understanding instead. Yet my idea of ontology is exactly the *reverse* of Mouffe’s agonist publicness. An ontology is not a priori related to the intrinsic political constitution of social reality (embedded in power relations), as Mouffe would have it, but related to man’s particular reflection on aspects of human existence that cannot be put in a scientific language. As Otto Duintjer has written: “Ontological statements do not refer to *the* reality in itself, but clarify our understanding of what we take as ‘existence’ or ‘reality,’ given the context of a certain praxis, or broader, given a dominant world view within a certain time and culture.”<sup>35</sup> An ontology is constituted by the dialectic between our particular sensations and general impressions of the world. While the world is ‘filled’ with socially constructed artefacts, underneath these ‘architectures’ particular intuitions and experiences play a crucial role in understanding them. Civil publicness is centred on the reflection on this very dialectic, which is, as Habermas once wrote, “a process of self-clarification of private people”<sup>36</sup> – of a people independent from political imperatives.

### **Artistic publicness**

A civil conception of public space is most sympathetic to thinking about art’s position in society. Differently stated, the idea that publicness is an ontological sensation in a non-political environment goes well with the idea of artistic publicness. Works or art may invite the public to contemplate their particular aesthetic sensations in question, through which a

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<sup>34</sup> Certainly, in practice the distinction between society and politics is not clear-cut, but this does not say anything about the value of making such a conceptual distinction. Physical power, psychological manipulation and other dependencies are part of our daily life, but these things do not withhold us to believe in and strive for things like liberty and truth.

<sup>35</sup> Otto Duintjer (1988) *Rondom metafysica: over ‘transcendentie’ en de dubbelzinnigheid van de metafysica*, pp. 7-8, translation GD.

<sup>36</sup> Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, p. 29.

different or deeper understanding of the world might be achieved.<sup>37</sup> Buergel writes: “Artists educate themselves by working through form and subject matter; audience educate themselves by experiencing things aesthetically. How to mediate the particular content or shape of those things without sacrificing their particularity is one of the great challenges of an exhibition like the documenta.”<sup>38</sup> This requires an open mindset, and accepting “[t]he possibility of not understanding, of a total failure to relate [...] in order to enable other ways of understanding, other forms of relation.”<sup>39</sup>

In this respect a political conception of artistic publicness is deficient for it does not acknowledge the many *other* expressions, actions and manifestations of art that are *not* focused on challenging dominant power relations in the social order. The virtue of publicness in general is not to agonize social reality *per se*, but to understand it, to theorize it, and even to classify it; with the purpose, to develop different forms of organization in which the dialectic of publicness (in which private sensations are indispensable) can prosper.

Documenta’s 11 and 12 have demonstrated the difference between a political and non-political conception of artistic publicness. In the end, I think, art’s potential to carry political statements only will increase if we discard any a priori political single-mindedness. As Boomgaard has put it: “Art should be concerned about the world, but artists must continue to create their own platform and not allow themselves to become string puppets in the official commitment show.”<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps it was a *lack of artistic publicness* that caused Buergel to tone down documenta’s ambitions (or not, you could say), and return to the issue of the relation between art, its public, and the world. But it might also be the increasing *politicization of publicity* that Buergel led to a focus on artistic publicness. In this respect it is telling how he writes about the first documenta (1955), which he compliments for being “a form of organization.”<sup>41</sup> The exhibition raised the question where art stands and where we stand, Buergel explains. And although he acknowledges its very particular post-war context, he sees documenta as *exemplary*, because it the “took place neither on the basis of the country’s [West Germany, GD] new constitution, nor on the basis of religious or political beliefs [...]. Within the context of documenta, the public constituted itself on the groundless basis of aesthetic experience – the experience of objects whose identity cannot be identified. Here there was nothing to

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Richard Sennett (1974, 1992) *The Fall of Public Man*, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.documenta12.de/leitmotive.html?&L=1>, last visit: 13 September 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Roger M. Buergel (2007) “The Origins,” p. 39.

<sup>40</sup> Boomgaard, “Platform of Commitment,” p. 51.

<sup>41</sup> Buergel, “Origins,” p. 32.

understand, in the true sense, no preconceptions, which is precisely why it was possible and essential to talk about everything, to communicate about everything. The exhibition was, in short, an act of civilization.”<sup>42</sup>

Public space is not inherently political. The experience of publicness can arise in all sorts of ways and relate to an endless array of subjects and objects. The essence of public space lies in its spatial possibility to have a particular experience with a general meaning, through which a public may arise. A civil conception of public space is precisely about how we organize the possibility of these dialectics. Yet, the experience of *how* publicness is evoked by art – unexpectedly, contingently, unanticipatedly<sup>43</sup> – shows precisely its distinctive beauty. Here lies the potential didactics of artistic publicness.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Jeroen Boomgaard (2004) “An Injection of Planlessness.”

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