

The Double Promise of Virtuality.

On the Social Function of Culture in the Case of Virtueel Museum Zuidas.

1. There is no such a thing as a free lunch

When the Amsterdam municipality and private parties first formulated in 2001 the development plans for what is now called the Zuidas, a key role was ascribed to the visual arts. From the very first the involved parties believed that art would be essential for the economic development of the new district. As a result, two years later, the Virtual Museum Zuidas was set up. The programme of this institution was envisioned as unfolding into two main activities: the central one being “co-constructing with architecture,” which eyes the incorporation of permanent artworks in urban design, architecture and public space; and the second one being the “auxiliary projects,” whose goal is to boost the Zuidas’ attractiveness and enlivening the residential/work district during the construction phase by the combination of architecture, urban planning, design and visual art. In this dual form, the tasks of art according to the Virtual Museum Zuidas are:

- to improve the standard of quality of life and to promote energy and vigour
- to construct a new identity for the district
- to create an agreeable atmosphere suited to the tastes and inclinations of the inhabitants
- to enhance the area’s national and international distinction and to make it more appealing for businesses to settle in the area
- to facilitate the “a high degree of function-mixing”
- to find the right balance between global and local, multifaceted and yet made for people.

It is difficult to ignore a nagging, albeit vague feeling that something is problematic in this list of scenarios. Two possibilities seem to present themselves: either one is inclined to view this job-description for art suspiciously, as if it were intended for a branding campaign rather than for a cultural programme; or one takes a pragmatic approach, realizing that art too must be placed within the context of our service-driven, post-Fordist, neoliberal political economy. The first option reveals an assumption that art must be *autonomous*. This in fact means nothing more than the belief that, art, in order for it to be art, must necessarily be kept in a realm separate from the messy, greedy, material transactions of daily life. As such, this art ‘functions’ when it provides an alternative to the everyday life. This implies that art objects should not be confused with the other mundane objects populating our world, such as design or buildings—in short, with any other object with a clear social function. If this can be labelled an ‘idealist’ position, the latter option betrays a so-called ‘pragmatic’ stance. It figures that we live in an advanced capitalist society in which nothing comes or is given for free. It asks: who is paying for that autonomous piece of art and who will benefit from it? What is the added value that art brings that other (cheaper) goods and services are unable to provide? Following from this market-driven logic, it concludes that art must somehow be able to ‘pay up’ its expense: it must be able to ‘deliver’ a measurable, calculable social benefit. This position holds that art must be *heteronomous* in order to be justifiable.

Discussions involving culture, and moreover the 'point', 'use' or 'necessity' of art, have never been simple or straight-forward. This just seems to be part of the game. It is also well-known that often deliberations about present circumstances seem to have a short-sighted historical perspective, seeing whatever it is that happens 'now' as much more urgent and complex than whatever came before. Having said that, it is difficult to not try to make a case for the precariousness in which art finds itself today, squeezed as it is between two positions that do not leave it a lot other space for developing and being, perhaps, 'something else' that is neither autonomous nor heteronomous. This exact concern is being raised by a countless number of publications and institutions. Particularly since the widespread rise of Right Wing politics, the main concern has little to do with whether something is art or not, but rather regards *how* and *whether* art should be justified at all.

Between these two equally abstract notions regarding the social function of art and culture, institutions such as the Virtual Museum Zuidas (VMZ) operate daily, taking concrete decisions that blur, enact—or altogether bypass—any clear standpoints on the social function of art. The VMZ can at first seem like an easy target for criticism, particularly when it fuses ideological with pragmatic arguments into visionary contentions such as that art creates a “typical Amsterdam flavour, original, rooted in local and regional culture, self-willed, impossible to copy, enduring, experimental, innovative” (Vision text 2007). While it is tempting to dismiss this mission statement as populist, it also epitomises the fact that institutional practices too need to conform to pressures from the outside, and that they can only operate critically from *within* a neoliberal logic. As economic theory has taught us long ago, “there’s no such thing as a free lunch.”

Yet the question remains: which argument can defend culture from the aforementioned external pressures? To find an answer, we need to address the relation between art and society afresh, meaning, from both the autonomous and the heteronomous perspectives. These questions are as old as art itself, yet nevertheless, they lay at the core of the Virtual Museum Zuidas's (VMZ) functioning. This essay will contextualise the foundation of the VMZ in a broader cultural framework, and discern how the VMZ too negotiates the role of culture within a rising socio-economic network, here more specifically, that of the Amsterdam Zuidas.

2. Of transparency and opacity

Seen in retrospect, the foundation and communication of the Virtual Museum is very much a product of its time. The VMZ was constituted parallel to the abundant art critical debates on the public nature of art institutions, and thrived on coinciding artistic and curatorial initiatives of the last decade. For one, it arose in the wake of the relational and societal turn in art practices of the mid to late 1990s. Following Nicolas Bourriaud, this form of cultural production would indeed take as its horizon “the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space”, yet it would equally reach far beyond the selective range of artistry he once labelled relational aesthetics. (Bourriaud, RA, p. 14) Contemporary art sought to generally reclaim its social agency in the age of capitalism, fed up with the ongoing commodification voiding the critical power of the artwork on the one hand, and with the often hermetic self-reflexivity of institutional critique on the other. It did so by aiming its critical arrows at society at large rather than at the art institution, and by

nestling its activities increasingly in strands of research and theoreticism. Artistic production now materialised in historical fact-finding or social interpellations in-situ, and the artist, once a solemn manufacturer of painterly and sculptural goods, mutated into what Andrea Fraser called 'a post-Fordist service provider.' (Fraser, *What's Intangible, Transitory, mediating, participatory, and rendered in the public sphere?* p. 1) Liam Gillick's discussion platforms, Thomas Hirschhorn's monuments for philosophy and Jorge Pardo's library decorations all exemplify such an artistry, accommodating knowledge production under various guises and forms. As a consequence, public education surreptitiously came to exceed aesthetic experience as the fundamental condition for a political work of art, and discourse and allegory – once that implicit surplus of postmodern cultural production – served overtly as its social legitimisation. It thus strikes as no surprise that the abovementioned artists furiously engage in art critical polemics, seen as that theoretical output validates their artistic practice – not to mention culture at large. As such, relational art dually instrumentalises an *artistic transparency*. On the one hand, it rescues the critical artwork from nullification through interactivity and readability; on the other, it legitimises art within a capitalist society through the argument of public education.

Secondly, and in alignment with the increased relational sociability in art, various freelance curators sought to shirk their independent position for reattachment to a single institution. The independent exhibition maker, which had been the curatorial norm from Harald Szeemann in the late 1970s to Hans Ulrich Obrist in the 1990s, was reoriented in favour of a fresh and experimental institutionalism. Various European institutions broadened traditional exhibition production through residency schemes, lectures and conferences, to some extent incorporating the legacy of relational aesthetics to mutate the institution from the inside. Maria Lind's Kunstverein Munich, Catherine David's Witte de With in Rotterdam, and Charles Esche's Rooseum in Malmö all are examples of what art critic Alex Farquharson coined 'new institutionalism': art centres validating social engagements as their core occupation. (Farquharson, *e-flux*) Workshops and group discussions activated staff, artists and audience in a participatory and dialogical engagement, making up institutional identity from marginal functions. Very much like relational art practices, these institutions too had a double goal. On the one hand, they aimed to reactivate their role as a public site, after the largely sovereign and even hermetic institutional practices of the 1980s – think Rudi Fuchs or Jan Hoet. On the other, they sought to legitimise their operativity under the socio-political pressures of today's cultural industries, art galleries and fairs too incorporating the presentation of art. Consequently, the institutions held the promise of creating alternative forms of publicness to the by now dissolved bourgeois social sphere. Following Alex Farquharson once more, new institutionalism "side-steps the problem of the white cube altogether" by relating not too architecture, but too a "competing public in the plural" or a "collective autonomy writ large." (Farquharson, *E-flux*) It provided in an enclosed public environment which could counter the shrinking welfare state, the erosion of social bond and the global hegemony of neoliberal economics. The followed strategy thus is that of *institutional opacity*, which again has ideological as well as pragmatic features in the guises of counter-publicness and societal legitimisation.

One needs only to skip through a recent number of *Open* magazine to see the myriad of voices following in a similar logic as Farquharson – preaching eagerly such terms as 'counter-publics' (Sheik), 'ideological intimacy' (Tuinen), 'autonomous public art' (Boomgaard), or 'institutional opaqueness' (Möntmann) – yet a sound note of warning is equally in place here. Similar to Farquharson's warning that "the danger is

that the institution becomes a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* ultimately authored not by artists but by curators,” we must see to it that new institutionalism walks the talk. And here, the majority of projects would appear to fall short of their intentions, the pragmatic side often overtaking the ideological one. Art historian Sven Lütticken cunningly grasped this evolution, as he retroactively commented on his own claim for a ‘secret publicity’ art sphere:

“Since Max Weber, many authors have elaborated on the autonomy of different social spheres and disciplines as a constituting element of modern society—and, as Harold Rosenberg argued in the 1950s, each of these social sectors tends to develop a purist streak, developing “its procedures in terms of its own possibilities without reference to the needs of any other profession or of society as a whole.” Sadly, his words seem all too applicable to many New Institutionalism projects. There is a faux-Habermasian idealism at play, the institution positing itself as an uncorrupted *Öffentlichkeit* (publicness) in which people from different academic backgrounds can gather; however, a lack of precision often leads to a simple juxtaposition rather than dialogue or confrontation, and the publicness boils down to a convivial simulation of debate and discourse. In this way, New Institutionalism is ultimately complicit with relational art, operating as its discursive double.”

3. The double promise of virtuality

In the wake of relational practices and New Institutionalism, the currents of artistic transparency and institutional opacity not only have come to dominate current debate, but form the ideological germ from which has sprung the Virtual Museum. For as it puts into practice artistic research and institutional idiosyncrasy, the VMZ forms not just another offshoot of New Institutionalism, but constitutionally embodies it, both in structure as in terminology. Firstly, for artists, the inclusion of the term ‘virtual’ in the museum’s title holds strong ideological connotations, even though rooted in a somewhat sloganesque interpretation of “an artistic climate [in] an age of cultural-commercial themeparks.” As the museum ‘without walls’ promises little to no mediation, the arena of cultural action integrally coincides with that of the public realm, and artists can freely create “new forms of publicness” through social engagement. And, whereas the public interventions obviously quite literally enact on their surroundings, the projects grouped under the six-month residence programme of Free Spaces are cleverly endowed with similar social agency. Although the artists operate from studios located in the same building as the ZVM itself – the former St. Nicolaas Cloister edging the Zuidas – the idea still holds that having them live and work ‘on location’ will stimulate “social involvement” and further “the human dimension” of art. Giving artists “hardly any themes or requirements” except to develop “fine new critical insights and different, unexpected approaches and perspectives,” the Free Spaces brief proclaims to foresee the artists in a maximum of sovereignty, and to impede them as little as possible. Nevertheless, as is apparent from the artistic outcomes spanning from Lieven De Boeck’s land ownership to Bik van der Pol’s quest for four-leaf clovers, the context of the Zuidas is imposed as a subject of work. Artists are free to research whatever they please – as long as it involves their working environment in one way or another. As such, the

cultural production only metaphorically springs unmediated from the nexus of artist and society; in reality, the institutional commissioner surreptitiously stands in-between.

Secondly, on an institutional level, the notion of virtuality implies a resistance to material sedimentation or concrete pinpointing that equally rings ideological. Here, the museum inscribes itself in the register of the ephemeral, not in its artistic output nor in its institutional establishment – see the material artworks and museum architecture – but in its mode of operation. Occupying “the entire Zuidas [as] a lively and changing museum,” the material formation of the VMZ coincides with the Zuidas or is non-existent at all, its cultural activities disclosed solely to an intimate club of admirers. Only those who have mapped the artworks or browsed the museum’s website know where artworks are to be recognised as such, and it is this digital consensus that forms the institutional realm. Accordingly, the claims of ‘counter-publicness’ and ‘ideological intimacy’ in *Open* magazine would here come into practice, seen as the notion of virtuality hulls the VMZ in the aforementioned opacity. However, while the motivations for such an institutional formation may lay in the resistance to a dominant social logic, as in the logic of Farquharson, its precariousness equally shows in the VMZ. Here, it is epitomised by the ‘co-constructing with architecture’ programme, the Virtual Museum’s chief and most valued activity. Artists are invited at the planning stage of city sectors, buildings and public squares under the premises for them to “improve the liveability, liveliness and character of the location” with “structural interventions”. More importantly though, the particular commissioning ensures that the fate of the artworks are “inextricably and permanently connected to the city,” so as that they “only lose their function and agency when the Zuidas is demolished.” While this assertion integrates artworks in architecture and public space, dubiously echoing the social commitment of the Gesamtkunstwerk in Berlage’s Plan Zuid (South Plan), it grounds the institution in the material realm of the Zuidas as well. For here, the social functioning of the public artwork depends on its physical bearers rather than its institutional legitimisation, transforming the latter’s cultural authority to that of the built environment. Engaged public artworks are recognised as such – as long as they are somehow embedded into architecture. Accordingly, aligning institutional powers with those of architecture, it could be argued that the museum mutates from virtual to material, and its status from opaque to perfectly clear. Here too the institutional opacity thus appears but a metaphor, the hermeticism waning once cultural authority is attributed to the material realm of the Zuidas. Accordingly, as the Virtual Museum undermines itself in the justification of committed art through architecture, the promise of virtuality again turns out a disillusion.

4. You cannot have your cake and eat it too

Thus, we come full circle and seem to be left with one of two options when arguing for the ‘necessity’ of art. The first argues that art is necessary because it offers an escape from the marketplace of daily life. This is the option in which art functions as autonomous, opaque and secret; in other words, in opposition to and separate from life. The second option sees art as necessary when it functions *in terms of* daily life: when art provides a particular type of service, just like a school or a hospital provide services. In this option, the autonomy of art—which simply means the awareness that an object is ‘different’ from the objects of daily life and is therefore inaccessible—must dissolve and art must become heteronomous, which means that it must become transparent to the

point that it blends into its surroundings and as such is able to properly provide its social services. Before tackling whether or not art even should be justified and how to go about it, it is important to realize that at the core of both arguments lie beliefs regarding what the autonomy of art means. One of the fundamental characteristics of these beliefs is that autonomy and heteronomy, opacity and transparency will remain forever in irreconcilable: you cannot have your cake and eat it too. Rather than trying to argue for one or the other side, it is also possible to consider that it is the assumption that autonomy and heteronomy are antithetical that locks the thinking about the relationship between art and society into a vicious circularity. So we must question whether it is not the premise on which this assumption is based on that is problematic, simply supporting a commonplace yet ultimately sterile notion of autonomy.

Our dominant notion of autonomy today still lives in the shadows of the legacy from Marx and the critical theorists—famously among whom Theodor W. Adorno. In order to grasp Adorno's notion of autonomy, it is necessary to contextualize it in terms of the burgeoning consumer capitalist economy of the first half of the twentieth century. This era saw the rise of a consumer society filled with consumer goods equally available to anyone. This 'equal' access to goods—which in principle meant that everyone had the same 'right' to the same things, irrespective of one's social background—was bannered as a proof of democracy: everyone has equal 'freedom' to acquire the same things. Now, Adorno argued that this notion of autonomy was just a defence of free-market capitalism since it sought to "justify an arrangement in which people are entitled to whatever they have not stolen [and] can do with it what they like (so long as those doings do not coerce others)" (Todd May, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière. Creating Equality*, Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008, p. 17.) Moreover, Adorno saw art just as complicit in this scheme as any other consumer good. Seeking to disassociate the notion of autonomy from that of political-economic logic, Adorno attempted to dislodge any claim to 'function' that might be imposed on art. Thus, the hallmark of autonomous art became the impossibility to instrumentalize it in any way; indeed, according to Adorno, the most significant social function of autonomous art was precisely to not have one. This results in the notion that autonomy is antithetical to the market of everyday life. It is from these premises that it becomes possible to argue about the necessity of art: either as autonomous (as championed by Adorno) or as heteronomous (which simply entails flipping the argument, as we saw in the previous section).

Philosopher Jacques Rancière devoted a substantial portion of his oeuvre precisely to the question of how to avoid locking the notion of autonomy in a vicious circle, as he suggested Adorno had done. To this end, he developed a conceptual frame that breaks down any opposition between the market-driven logic of everyday life and autonomy. For Rancière, autonomy happens in the moment when a person, or group of people, rises up against a particular injustice done onto them by the dominant social order. For example: when minorities openly demonstrate, demanding equal treatment. According to Rancière, what happens is that those people become, in the act of demonstration of their equality, autonomous from the status quo. However, this also means that autonomy comes about *only, and always, in relation to their social context*. In this framework, although subjects and society are in seeming opposition, in fact they are completely dependent on each other for having any meaning at all. There is thus no opposition between autonomous or heteronomous art, since the Rancièrian notion of autonomy itself is completely bound up with society.

If we attempt to answer the question posed in the beginning of the essay, “Which argument can defend culture from external pressures?” from these new premises, we would first need to modify the question to “Which argument can defend culture when we no longer see it in opposition to any ‘external’ pressures?” To be clear, to propose that ‘we’ as a society did that would amount to a pipe dream, as it would imply wishing for a large-scale political and economic change which is simply not only well beyond the scope of our considerations here, but also is missing the point. What we are interested in is thinking about the necessity of art once we leave behind the apparent contradictions between autonomy and heteronomy, opacity and transparency. Such a vision certainly seems greyer, more vague and less risqué than the thrill of exposing the convolutions and apparent contradictions between art and society. And yet, it might provide us with better tools for thinking about, analysing, and evaluating, the concrete and virtual daily practices of institutions such as Virtual Museum Zuidas.