

## Counterfoil

Archis

Yellow Folder  
Research

### The creation of a public sphere

Text

Ole Bouman

### The creation of a public sphere

Amsterdam, the intersection of Geerban and Oude Sloterweg. There's been a crossroads here for as long as anyone can remember. Fast traffic ran north-south, local traffic east-west, so you needed to watch out. It was a case of survival of the fleetest and not what you could call 'public space'. Until they built the roundabout. Traffic was redirected in a circular movement and from that moment there was a centre, a vacuum demanding to be filled. The age-old question of what to do with the heart of a traffic square presented itself. Surely this was an ideal place for an artwork? Just the job for a committee.

The nearby Olympia cycling club came up with a nice plan. Over the years, countless cyclists had crossed the road here on their way to the track. It seemed only fitting that a statue of the unknown cyclist, an ode to cycling, should be erected here. It was about nostalgia, identification, an allusion to the sport of the old intersection's most alert users.

But there were no cyclists on the committee. A figurative sculpture – the very idea! And so the plan perished and the committee enlisted the services of a member of the guild of public-space artists. A national celebrity, no less: Herman Makkink. He made an enormous object that almost entirely fills the middle of the roundabout. It's an abstract form, swiftly dubbed 'the Easter egg' by the cycling fraternity. Well, the intersection is now a striking landmark and that is precisely what the art committee had wanted.

Whichever way it had gone, the controversy represents a rearguard action. Both approaches derive from notions about art in public space that are as good as obsolete. Both the idea of a symbolic allusion to local history, and the idea of a visual reference point, are under threat in the current debate about this type of art. Which may explain why that debate is so fierce and so comprehensive. Nothing is self-evident any more when it comes to the artistic elaboration of the public realm. There are scarcely any people who share a history that lends itself to iconographic representation. There are scarcely any idealistic meanings with sufficient authority to convince and motivate society. But there are also scarcely any places that are improved by the addition of an expressive object conjured up by one of the much-patronized public-art specialists. Thematic urbanism is on the rise and it has its own ideas about how to create identity. All too often, a bland public realm is overcompensated with an excess of urban design. In other words: there is no longer any natural employment for this specialism.

This is not to say that there are no artists who devote themselves to it with great passion. Or that the public sphere has become redundant. Quite the contrary. This is why it is no longer so much a question of where and with whom we might set to work, but of which moments in public life might be illuminated, strengthened or even created by dint of what kind of passionate artistic interventions. If public space is no longer self-evident, is there not a case for simply reinventing it? Should the artists we

enlist for this task be the familiar 'autonomous discipline' practitioners, or could they perhaps be versatile infiltrators with a variety of skills? Should that public sphere necessarily be defined in spatial terms? Such questions as these are addressed in this issue of Archis by a number of thinkers. And not only thinkers. Archis invited a number of artists to appropriate space in the magazine. They show us what it means when the pages of a magazine are treated as public space.

Limited viewing: Archis as public art.

Ole Bouman

Beneath the paving stones, the beach.

A beach is the ideal public space.