

# INTRODUCTION

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In his contribution to the publication accompanying *Skulptur Projekte Münster* of 1997, Daniel Buren states that almost all sculptures that he sees outdoors are boring and toothless. They are either so generic that no one can take offence or so inconspicuous that only highly trained art historians can understand them and everyone else simply walks by without noticing them. According to Buren, one of the main causes of this sorry state of affairs is that politicians don't show enough guts in commissioning art works for the public space. However, what Buren observes here is part of a much larger problem that stems from a shift in the notion of what 'public' is. Both the public—a group of people focusing their attention on something—and the public domain, i.e. the space that we share with others without hindrance, are judged quantitatively these days. An exhibition is only a success if it draws huge crowds and the public space is deemed successful especially when it is used on a massive scale without incurring damage.

One of the consequences of this emphasis on a quantitative approach is that the notion of public loses its specificity, and domains that used to be separate in function and use are now beginning to blend. The art space is becoming more of a public space, while the public space rather becomes a space for a public to attend or participate in events and demonstrations. In this collection of essays we are not so much concerned with how these spaces are merging or with the policies that

encourage and promote this development. Rather, we aim to explore, from a variety of perspectives, how art as actor in Latour's sense operates in this new, hybrid space. In all the contributions to this publication art is discussed as a phenomenon that is defined by certain spatial conditions and public expectations, but also as a presence that claims a particular space and originates a particular public.

Thus, in this book art serves as a catalyst for getting a grip on the complex whole of diverging and converging notions of the public and the public space. Because what is actually going on in this exchange between the public spaces and the closed spaces for a public? Both are legitimized by the presence of people but increasingly these people are seen as consumers. They must be triggered to gather in large numbers in one place in order to legitimize its public character. This means that the emphasis is on an offering that is potentially appealing to as many people as possible. The increase in blockbusters in museums and of 'fun' art in the street—as different as they may be—shows that event and entertainment are the driving forces of this programming. At the same time, art that emphatically rejects this development by retreating into isolation or by an appeal to singularity gets caught up in this confusion about what 'the public' is, too. In this publication, however, we try to avoid the fatalism by which isolation or surrender are presented as opposites, as if there were no other choice, by focusing on forces that

are intrinsic to art. The considerations presented here discuss the capability of art works to bring about a different distribution of the sensory (Rancière), to create new political space and space for politics, to explore other forms of public and to look for new publics.

The contributions in this volume deal with the following subjects: Art and its public (Lauwaert, Boomgaard, Brom, Lester); the personal, the public and the political (Ten Thije, Coumans, Fotiadi); public behaviour and public domain (Cramer, Neves Alves). *Being Public: How Art Creates the Public* is about the notions of the public and the public domain, notions that we use frequently without thinking too much about their meaning. The book gives no definitions for these terms and doesn't supply any answers, but it does provide new insights and it poses questions about the practices that take place behind these terms.