

## **Public Art Commissions, Exemplified by Auke de Vries**

Franz W. Kaiser

Since 1969, as well as his 'free' sculptures, Auke de Vries has been producing designs for commissioned work destined for public spaces. So far twenty-six such commissions have been realized; three have not yet progressed beyond the design stage. Bearing in mind that it can often take from one to two years to see a design through from preliminary sketch stage to its technically demanding execution, we may take it that Auke de Vries's involvement with public commissions is an important catalyst for his artistic ideas.

'Art in public spaces' has many labels: commissioned art, public art, art-in-architecture, monuments, memorials. Taken literally, they certainly do not mean the same thing, and art is of course always public anyhow. Clarification of the term would appear to be in order.

### **PUBLIC**

The adjective 'public' refers to an area outside the art institution. Since art inside the museum is public too, the criterion can scarcely be one of principle but rather of degree. The museum public is predisposed. It expects art and nothing but art, and is willing to acknowledge banal utensils as art objects; that is what the principle of the ready-made is based on. Dating from the dawn of the century, the ready-made implied criticism of the museum as an institution remote from everyday life and accessible only to an elite. That criticism drew attention to the institution's deliberate aloofness. The intention backfired, though. Instead of abolishing the museum, the work of art became increasingly defined by that very institution; the pedestal or gilt frame which had hitherto accredited a work as art now became superfluous.

Since then the work of art has become less recognizable as such when the institutional framework is missing.

To a considerable extent the terms 'art in public spaces' and 'commissioned art' are used synonymously. Originally all art was commissioned. Our notion of art is however bound up with the idea of the genius who does not wait for commissions but conceives and creates on his own initiative. In the case of public art this is usually hampered by legal complications and the high cost of realizing a concept. Things are done as they always have been done: first the client defines the project, and only then does the artist enter the arena. Public commissions are however no longer confined to an elite class of patrons distinguished by a certain level of education and the concomitant codes. By the same token the works are no longer dictated by codes either, but start off as highly personal statements. Actually, these statements are not entirely arbitrary but emerge from the development of an artist's output. His total oeuvre, in turn, often manifests itself as a particular attitude to the conventions of art history. However, the general public-art public is not party to these frames of reference. Although a public space usually plays a part in defining the works specifically designed for it, and gives the general public at least a clue towards understanding these works (after all, they know the space because they use it every day), an opposite reaction is usually provoked. People are annoyed that a seemingly arbitrary operation has changed their familiar surroundings.

## STUMBLING-BLOCK OR DECORATION

Must public art please the daily users of the context in which it is installed, or must it satisfy the demands of a specifically sensitized art public? The difficulty of reconciling the two requirements is illustrated by the fate of a few public installations by a highly regarded figure in the world of avant-garde art: the American sculptor Richard Serra whose works conspicuously refer to their surroundings. The history of *Tilted Arc*, commissioned for the Federal Plaza in Lower Manhattan, is paradigmatic. In 1979 the United States General Services Administration's Art-in-Architecture Program commissioned a sculpture, stipulating that it be site-specific and permanent. The result was a curved, tilted plate of steel, 3.66 metres high and 37.51 metres long. Serra: 'Site specific works are determined by the topography of the site, whether it is urban, landscape or an architectural enclosure. My works become part of and are built into the structure of the site and often restructure, both conceptually and perceptually, the organization of the site....The historical concept of placing sculpture in a pedestal was to establish a separation between the sculpture and the viewer. I am interested in a behavioural space in which the viewer interacts with the sculpture in its context. ....Space becomes the sum of successive perceptions of the place. The viewer becomes the subject'.<sup>1</sup> Ten years later the sculpture was removed in response to protests from people who used the Plaza every day. Serra's efforts to prevent its removal by legal means had been unsuccessful. His invocation of the right of free speech fell on stony ground, for under American law this right does not apply to a work of art unless it conveys a distinct political message: 'Artistic expression is seen as primarily derivative in nature and therefore marginal in value. This legal position reflects the status of the arts in American society, where art often tends to be perceived as mere entertainment and most Americans' contact with 'culture' is film or television'.<sup>2</sup> Even in professional circles opinion differs as to the value of contemporary artistic expression, but when a legal system permits an artwork's value to be measured by the yardstick of the vacillating taste of television audiences, that work is given no chance of standing the test of time. To be sure, television audiences are in the vast majority and in accordance with democratic principles their taste should prevail. But that taste is also the lowest common denominator and as such it has a levelling effect. It is unable to appreciate the value of exceptional artistic expression – on which, after all, our concept of high culture is based. All avant gardes encountered initial opposition, and yet today they are accepted as our cultural heritage. Only the test of time can establish a lasting value- judgment.

The fate of *Tilted Arc* serves to exemplify modern art's inability to unite the public and private spheres as it used to. Artist and patron must be prepared to conduct protracted negotiations and to encounter reactions ranging from indifference to physical aggression. Quite a lot of public art skirts the issue by catering to indifference. Blandly reticent, it complies with the architect's desire for inoffensive decoration. To art-lovers, though, it is an eyesore.

## MONUMENTS

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Serra, *Selected Statements Arguing in Support of 'Tilted Arc'*, ed. Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk, Eindhoven 1988, pp.64-65.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Hoffman, 'Law for Art's Sake', in: W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *Art and the Public Sphere*, University of Chicago Press 1992, p.127.

Things can be different, however, witness the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* – surely Washington’s most-frequented monument today and in a way the antithesis of Serra’s *Tilted Arc*<sup>3</sup>. Two polished black granite walls meet at an angle of 125 degrees and 12 minutes, tapering towards the outer ends. They are engraved with the names of 58,000 American soldiers who died in the Vietnam war and the dates of their deaths. The installation is symmetrical, and because it backs onto soil, the beholder cannot fail to grasp its meaning. Its maker, Maya Lin, is not an artist. When she designed the memorial in the early eighties she was twenty-one years old and studying architecture at Yale. Her aim was to stimulate a therapeutic catharsis and she certainly seems to have succeeded, for it is virtually impossible to visit the memorial without coming across Vietnam veterans. Presumably they are searching for the names of lost comrades with whom they are linked by personal experiences which have left a lasting mark.

By that token the Vietnam Memorial is part of a tradition that goes back to primeval times (if we include megalithic grave culture), a tradition of funerary and cult structures universally characterized by *memento mori*. Since no mortal is excepted from the finiteness of physical existence, memorials, by virtue of their status, are surfaces on which individual experiences and a collective coming-to-terms with those experiences can be projected.

*Tilted Arc* offers no link with that kind of personal experience. Although its structure may be experienced physically, i.e. individually, awareness of that experience depends on the appropriate expectations. The casual passer-by cannot be presumed to have these expectations. It would be premature to conclude from this that only memorials make for good public art. Maya Lin’s piece is an exception which proves the rule. Most memorials – even when they do work well – are classic examples of poor taste and unworthy to be called art. Because they refer to content – to things we are meant to remember – they are incompatible with our western concept of art, which is based on a free art, an art free of denoted content and function. However, an artist who ventures to broach public space with his personal project would be well advised to bear in mind the memorial’s long tradition in the history of humanity, for that is the expectation or attitude he will have to face.

## VISUAL NOISE

The world around us is crowded with visual signals: signposts, traffic signs, billboards, neon advertisements, logos, street furniture. We ‘understand’ them because we know the street code, or we think we understand them because advertising’s frame of reference is our day-by-day acquaintance with its fleeting fashions. Actually, billboards and neon ads have nothing to tell us except that we should buy something – not really a foreground issue. Unlike public art, advertising does not rely on the viewer’s special attention; it is strident and pushy, allowing no opportunity for critical distance. To an ever-increasing extent its ubiquitous presence is defining our perception habits and thereby people’s expectations of a work of art in a public space they use every day. Notably, American artists have taken this

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<sup>3</sup> Regarding the following section compare: Charles L. Griswold, *The Vietnam Memorial and the Washington Mall: Philosophical Thoughts on Political Iconography*, in: Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p.100 ff.

phenomenon into account. The first to do so were pop artists like Claes Oldenburg, while in the eighties such artists as Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger deliberately resorted to advertising strategies in order to target a wide public. Interviewed about the apparent contextual independence of her work – from gallery and museum to billboards, stickers, picture postcards and suchlike and back again, Barbara Kruger answered: ‘Well, I don’t see them as separate spaces’, and asked if she thought they were indistinguishable, she replied: ‘No, no, I think that they’re different...’. However, in the same interview she explained: ‘But I think that there are those of us who don’t see themselves as guardians of culture. We hope for a place which allows for differences and tolerances. What we are doing is trying to construct another kind of spectator who has not yet been seen or heard.’<sup>4</sup> If two different spaces were not separate, it would probably be hard to differentiate them – and the spaces we are concerned with here certainly can be differentiated. An essential difference between public space and an art gallery is that the latter sells billboards at high prices because they are traded there as objects of culture. The hypocrisy of this argument is only too obvious: on the one hand Kruger regards culture as elitist and obsolete and expresses her criticism by leaving the cultural institutions and entering public space; on the other hand the cultural institution is accepted and its value-enhancing potential exploited for financial gain by the sale of billboards as objects of culture for high prices to an elite public. And it is in any case doubtful whether a few billboards can construct another kind of spectator in the thick of all that deafening visual noise.

## THE DILEMMA

Terms like ‘public art’, ‘art-in-architecture’ and ‘commissioned art’ have acquired international notoriety as bad art. This international consensus is not accidental. A good work of art outside the walls of the art institutions is the exception rather than the rule, and the sparse good works rarely elicit a favourable response from the man in the street.

There are a variety of reasons for this. One of the most obvious has already been mentioned. The context of the art institution having become an integral part of the work of art since the ready-made, there is no conventional starting-point in public space. The average public unfamiliar with contemporary art or with the work of the respective artist lacks the essential qualifications for coping with public art. Indifferent or aggressive reactions (‘is that supposed to be art?’) are merely a logical consequence.

The lack of an institutional frame of reference is responsible for a second reason. The different kind of selection process to which commissions are subjected (usually a more or less democratic procedure involving, say, the architect’s proposal, a jury of local bigwigs including local artists) has generated a specific environment in which mediocrity prevails, an environment in which artists without artistic projects of their own confine their efforts to whitewashing the sins of municipal architecture. Their work is rarely encountered in museums.

It is against this backdrop that one might ask whether ‘public art’ is perhaps superfluous. It communicates nothing, it refuses to assume the guise of a memorial

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<sup>4</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *An Interview with Barbara Kruger*, in: Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p.234 ff.

but has no other function, it invariably prompts protests and on top of everything it is regularly pilloried by the profession as the acme of bad art and adversely compared with 'free' art.

Subliminally this double rejection (by the general public and by expert opinion) reflects a dilemma of modern art that is rooted in the genesis of our western concept of art. The aforementioned effect of institutional criticism of the ready-made and the intrinsic problems of art in public places are indicative of the fateful link between institution and concept. In a definable historical process the art institution has evolved into a consequence of the crystallization<sup>5</sup> of modern society.

The German sociologist Max Weber was the first to recognize the fundamental characteristic that distinguishes modern society from all other societies. In the famous introduction to his essays on religious philosophy he asks himself why outside Europe neither scientific, artistic, national nor economic development steered into the paths of rationalization peculiar to the occident.<sup>6</sup> By rationalization he means the demystification process which in Europe caused a secular culture to emerge from crumbling religious world-views. The concomitant differentiation of specialist spheres in society – politics, jurisdiction, science, economics, culture – should be understood as the institutionalization of calculated, rationally organized administrative action.<sup>7</sup> Art is one of these specialist spheres, a precondition for its liberation from its original ritual-functional context. A concrete example is the medieval retable, transferred from its original cultic context – the church – to the neutral context of the museum. The consequence of the development of an autonomous art institution was thus the functionless, autonomous work of art.<sup>8</sup>

Institutionalization means specialization. A specialized institution, however, is not accessible to just anybody. Modern advanced education in the field of, say, mathematics corresponds with the standard of 17<sup>th</sup>-century science. It takes years of specialized study to reach today's standard. Such social isolation would be unacceptable for art, which from its cultic past has preserved a claim to totality as the proclaimer of universally valid truth. Separateness from ordinary life is hard to reconcile with such claims to totality, and artists' attempts to break out of institutional isolation are as old as our concept of art. A 19<sup>th</sup>-century example is the 'tendency towards the Gesamtkunstwerk'<sup>9</sup>; at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century virtually all avant-garde movements – Dada, Bauhaus, De Stijl, Futurism, Constructivism, Surrealism and so forth – were designed to break out of the institution and intervene in normal daily life. And in the latter half of this century artists have constantly sought a manner of appropriating reality that would be relevant outside the institution – from pop art, performance, video art, all forms of process art, Joseph Beuys' 'expanded concept of art', neo-pop (Koons, Vaisman etc.) and neo-conceptual

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<sup>5</sup> Arnold Gehlen has described our modern cultural epoch as 'crystallization' in his *Über kulturelle Kristallisation*, in: *Studien zur Anthropologie und Soziologie*, Neuwied 1963, p.321.

<sup>6</sup> Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik I*, [1920] Gütersloh 1991, p.20.

<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main 1985, p.9.

<sup>8</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Bewusstmachung oder rettende Kritik – die Aktualität Walter Benjamins* in: *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins [...]*, ed. S. Unseld, Frankfurt am Main 1972, p.190.

<sup>9</sup> In 1983 Harald Szeemann organized an epolymous travelling exhibition, cf. the catalogue: *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk*, Sauerländer, Aarau/Frankfurt am Main 1983.

(Holzer, Kruger etc.) art in the eighties to the latest vogue for politically correct art. Another attempt to break out of the institution is public art.

None of these escape attempts succeeded in destroying the institution.<sup>10</sup> Their respective impacts – if any – on everyday life were shortlived<sup>11</sup>, and the fact that we still know about them today is due to their letter-day assumption into the institutions. The dilemma of the specialized or, if you like, personal project versus the claim to universality would therefore appear to be unsolvable. Disbanding the institution automatically involves disbanding the concept of art – making Barbara Kruger merely a commercial designer and no longer an artist. Preserved, the institution remains a repository for what has stood the test of time, the frame of reference for everything of cultural value. It is of course possible that none of the survivors of this age's rapidly changing fashions will be deemed worth preserving by the next generation. Museums – as is already the case with the big opera houses – would then be nothing but repositories for classics, without vigorous additions. Qualitatively superior cultural products would then, as intimated in the comment on the American verdict quoted above, be totally marginalized, meaning that there would be virtually no public for them and that they would no longer be products of culture in the narrow sense of the term. The only 'living' art would be television, and the artist would host a talkshow.

Be that as it may, nothing is predictable in the long-term view of culture. Such considerations – despite the impossibility of resolving the said dilemma – could encourage representatives of a high-quality culture to keep on rooting for public art. Criticism and protest from the directly involved public are forms of active debate, in contrast to advertising's goal of manipulating – preferably unnoticed – passive perception. Seen from this angle there is certainly some virtue in the aesthetic 'stumbling-block', if only as an exercise in a more conscious and critical approach to our overwhelmingly visual everyday environment.

Of course even television audiences have an inkling of 'high culture'. The Greeks, the Mayas, the Mona Lisa, Rembrandt, the Impressionists, van Gogh, etc., probably strike a responsive chord in everyone. In all probability the fictive issue of whether to sustain our efforts to produce and preserve high cultural achievement would be agreed upon fairly quickly – that is why such a question is hardly ever asked. But as soon as a decision has to be taken about what is worth preserving, there is a parting of the ways. Here the museum's function is to preserve everything a society's conventions deem worthy of being preserved – 'art', for instance. Much of it will perhaps be scorned by the next generation, but there will be time for the preserved things to crystallize any cultural value they may possess.

#### EXAMPLE: AUKE DE VRIES

Public art lacks this protection. For Auke de Vries that is nothing new. In more than twenty-five years of making sculptures for public spaces he has met with resistance

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<sup>10</sup> The fact that the institution is under increasing pressure to legitimize itself is less a matter of finally rewarding artists' efforts than of a growing idealization of liberalism as mass culture. A reminder, incidentally, that the mass culture ideology was invented by totalitarian systems which run the gamut from fascism to communism.

<sup>11</sup> On the subject of the failure of the classic avant garde see Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt am Main 1974.

on more than one occasion. He duly evinces a keen interest in the mediation activities surrounding his sculptures. The client's job really, but de Vries is perfectly willing to do his bit.

A work evidently on a private site, like his sculptures for Dutch Telecom in The Hague (1988) and the Netherlands Architectural Institute in Rotterdam (1994), is likely to encounter less virulent rejection. Things are more difficult when a location is part of an intensively used public area. Users tend to identify with that kind of area; the commission was granted by an abstract authority and the unknown artist's intervention is seen as a despotic act, invading a *Lebensraum* which users have come to regard as their own personal space. The best that mediation can achieve in such cases is to encourage users to identify with the sculpture as part of their *Lebensraum*, as a landmark with a function similar to a monument's. The path can be long and arduous though, as it was for the installation *Blühendes Barock* (Baroque in Bloom) which Auke de Vries designed to stand at the entrance to the German town of Ludwigsburg as part of a sculpture exhibition in the Stuttgart area in 1992/93. The aim of the exhibition was 'to give the location [of each sculpture] a new identity.'<sup>12</sup> Of course the organizers, Rudi Fuchs and Veit Görner, knew that a lot of mediation would be necessary, for part of the exhibition concept was to persuade people to accept the sculptures in the long term. The entrance to a town is a very important identifying factor for its inhabitants. Auke de Vries published articles in the local newspaper, attended discussion evenings and answered a lot of questions. The most difficult thing about such contacts with the public is to answer the inevitable, stereotype questions about the point of the work or what the artist is trying to convey. Quite often the artist doesn't know. In any case, this kind of question is inappropriate to a 20<sup>th</sup>-century artwork. This century's art invites us to get to grips with the work itself instead of waiting for instructions. Clues are provided by what the artist has to say about the work, by other works by the same artist, by art history and – the special thing about site-specific art – by the environment for which the work was designed.

## THE ON-SITE SCULPTURAL MENTAL PROCESS

Auke de Vries is one of the few artists who, when interested in a public space commission, do not meekly accept the placement chosen by the client. After all, in site-specific work, placement is part of the artistic concept. Striking examples in this context are the aforementioned sculpture for Dutch Telecom's head office at The Hague (1988) and *Het Maasbeeld* (Mass Sculpture, Rotterdam, 1982), with which de Vries first attracted international attention. The latter project began as an invitation to suggest colours for a proposed new road bridge across the river Maas. De Vries gracefully declined with the explanation that this was no job for a 'free' artist. Instead he asked for two years' grace during which, in collaboration with planners, he carefully examined the entire surrounding area. *Het Maasbeeld* started life as a 185 metre-long sculpture suspended between the old railway bridge and the new road bridge. To the casual glance of train passengers travelling between Rotterdam and Brussels it looked like a stretched-out skein of corded steel and heavy metal elements. It might equally well have been a random waste dockyard product which had been overlooked during clearing-up operations, were it not for the fact that the placement

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<sup>12</sup> Rudi Fuchs, *Einführung*, in: *Platzverführung*, Kulturregion Stuttgart 1992/93, Ostfilden-Ruit 1992, p.7.

of some of the hanging elements was obviously quite deliberate. The fleeting glance could not possibly make the same mistake today: the tracks are underground now and the railway bridge has been dismantled. All that remains – left there especially for the sculpture – is the bridge-pier from which it is suspended. The situation has thus mutated from an apparently random link between two bridges into a situation which gives the sculpture its own space, making it more ‘free’ in a way. The well-documented mutation<sup>13</sup> illustrates the subtle, visual interrelations of forces involved in an artist’s venture into public space with what are after all quite forceful interventions. Of course Auke de Vries knew that the railway bridge was to go, and devised his total concept accordingly. The popular nickname since conferred upon his sculpture – ‘washing-line’ – is an indication of its acceptance.

De Vries’ installation for Dutch Telecom, made six years later, may be likened to the Maas sculpture. It, too, is composed of an elongated sequence of forms, only this time they are vertical instead of horizontal. Again, the placement is highly unusual. What the client – predictably – originally had in mind was a traditionally placed sculpture in front of the building, which would have limited the public area. De Vries opted for the rear of the building, directly adjacent to the tracks of The Hague’s railway station, from which it would be seen every day by thousands of people waiting for, or sitting in, trains. The available space was however only 50 centimetres deep at the point chosen by de Vries, while the huge façade required a fairly large-scale intervention. The problem Auke de Vries set himself, then, was how to create a sculptural effect in such a long and above all flat-surfaced area. His solution is surprising, and the fact that the 40 metres of his sculpture’s horizontal development can be ‘read’ from a moving train adds an enriching aspect to what from a traditional point of view is an extremely unfavourable placement. De Vries’ deliberate choice of the more difficult option certainly paid off. Unusual challenges generate the unusual solutions to which his sculptures owe their frequently unique character.

## THE NAI SCULPTURE

To illustrate the complicated interaction between an on-site mental process and an artist’s personal, sculptural handwriting (in more general terms and hence applicable to all site-specific work: between what an artist finds on the spot and what he brings to it), I shall discuss Auke de Vries’ sculpture in front of the Netherlands Architectural Institute (NAi) in more detail.

Again, when de Vries accepted the commission there was no way he could experience the spatial situation of the projected work, because the Institute had not yet been built. In spite of this he frequently inspected the building site, pacing it out in every direction, testing different potential viewpoints. In short, he wanted to get the physical feel of the space. Sensory perception is always his point of departure, as it is in all find art – unlike architecture, which works with abstract plans and standard measurements. The things he saw on his forays to the site – cranes and other machinery, the building’s tall supporting structure, scattered construction material – inevitably found their way into his probing investigation and into the solution he was seeking. But even de Vries cannot do without a certain degree of abstraction or

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<sup>13</sup> Herman Moscoviter, *Het Maasbeeld van Auke de Vries – Een handtekening aan de nieuwe Maas*, Centrum Beeldende Kunst (publ. De Hef), Rotterdam 1995.

imagination. After all, he had to render the actual situation in order to envisage its final appearance.

In between these on-site inspections, de Vries' probings continued in the studio in the form of practical trials – drawings and constructions. I asked him to reconstruct the ordered sequence of NAI sculpture models to help me understand how he had approached the problem. At a first glance the result was disappointing. No systematic process is apparent in the sequence. Artistic probings preclude systematism. What is involved is not a continuous approach but a thematic attunement, and suddenly the solution is there. Details like the steel wire resembling hair standing up on end (models 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 12, 17) or the bent zigzag wire which in the final product links two crosses (models 9, 17) crop up earlier. Models 15 and 16 are very similar. Models 15 and 16 are very similar. (Models 13, 15, 16 are not reproduced). It seems after all as if the artist is homing in on a possible solution: a kind of bridge-form with elements sticking up into the air. In the decisive step towards the definitive solution, de Vries resorts to elements from earlier models: the tousled hair and zigzag wire; the yellow shape reminiscent of an electric light bulb was already hinted at in model 5, in grey. By now the bridge-form is almost straight and has acquired a wide, ascending, diagonal support which recalls model 1. It is thus doubly oriented along two diagonals (in fact the diagonal is already a principal form in model 2).

Auke de Vries explained to me that he had been intrigued by the contrast between the towering central building, covered by a pergola-like steel structure, and the elongated, relatively flat archive building (it does not overtop the surrounding buildings). And indeed, if the sequence of models were run past you like a film, the forms would move between vertical and horizontal without approaching either – as if they were the axes of two imaginary poles of tension. Shuttling swiftly to and fro, they approach the forms of an upward (see the bridge-form mentioned before) or downward curve or a diagonal.

#### INTERMEZZO: THEMATA

In his catalogue article for an Auke de Vries exhibition in the Wiesbaden Museum (1990), Cor Blok attempts a preliminary thematic classification of de Vries' output.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately he mixes up the categories, juxtaposing classifications such as 'hanging sculptures (*falling* theme)' or 'floorpieces' with ambitious installations like the Maas or Dutch Telecom sculptures. By 'theme' Blok seems to understand an identifiable group of works. The definition, however, fails to embrace the distinctive traits which characterize de Vries' oeuvre. More appropriate is the definition used by the scientific historian Gerald Holton: '...I have proposed a ninth component for the analysis of scientific work – that is thematic analysis. In many (perhaps most) past and present concepts, methods, and propositions or hypotheses of science, there are elements that function as themata, constraining or motivating the individual...these elements are usually not explicitly at issue. The attitude I have taken in the task of identifying and ordering thematic elements in scientific discussions is to some degree analogous to that of a folklorist or anthropologies who listens to the epic stories for their underlying thematic structure and recurrence.'<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Cor Blok, *Auke de Vries*, in: exhib. cat. Wiesbaden Museum, *Auke de Vries*, Wiesbaden 1990, p.23 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Gerald Holton, *The scientific imagination – Case studies*, Cambridge University Press 1978, pp.7-9.

This definition of theme permits us to recognize verticals and horizontals, for example, as themes in the NAI sculpture. Although they are not present in the sculpture, they are present in the building, towards which the sculpture develops a relationship of tension. As a matter of fact many of Auke de Vries' works of the seventies actually do feature vertical or seemingly tumbling rods. The underlying motivation for a vertical/horizontal theme is obvious. Since Mondrian at the latest, we have been aware of the fundamental significance of this type of structure for wide areas of Dutch art. Of extra significance to the sculptor is the fact that the vertical is the line of gravity (and the theme resurfaces in the hanging sculptures, incidentally). Remembering, then, that swinging the horizontal into the vertical was mentioned in connection with the step from the Maas sculpture to the Dutch Telecom sculpture, and adding Cor Blok's 'floorpiece' category and the one he calls '*graphic sculptures*' – by which he means, however, a type of sculpture which 'almost imperceptibly takes what is after all the decisive step away from two-dimensionality'<sup>16</sup>, we now have two large groups in which the works develop horizontally or vertically, as if emerging from the flat surface of a picture. In this connection it is important to know that Auke de Vries started off as a painter, and that he was best known as a graphic artist until the early seventies. This brings us to the second theme: the picture surface.

The third theme is surely the most striking. Even those sculptures which do not ostensibly develop from a flat surface lack the volume traditionally associated with sculpture. They are constructed chiefly from lines of varying thicknesses and are accentuated by planes. The prevailing absence of colour emphasizes the linear character. As I said, Auke de Vries was a graphic artist before he turned to sculpture – what is more, the first sculptures he made around 1967 were not conceived as sculptures at all, but as models for etchings. Basically, though, the etching is a three-dimensional technique, for the lines have to be carved into the metal plate. Donald Judd actually exhibited his plates as reliefs, and it is perhaps no coincidence that the tradition of sculptures as drawings in space (Gonzalez, Calder, Smith) was inaugurated by Picasso, a painter.

Lines are not a natural phenomenon. Where they do occur in nature, it is due to human intervention. With the artistic appropriation of nature, man has learned in a lengthy process to abstract an infinite multitude of perceived points and invest them with a new quality. The line makes it possible to isolate forms, to identify and define them. It is thus one of the first testimonials to the human capacity for analytical thought; it is also the basic artistic device for conveying reality.

Another painter, Kandinsky, was the chief protagonist in liberating the line from its function of representing reality. A line freed from that function, though, itself becomes a thing: 'The line is a thing whose meaning is just as practical and functional as that of a chair, a fountain, a knife, a book...'.<sup>17</sup> To Kandinsky, as to Mondrian, acknowledgement of the line's objecthood paved the way towards the principle of abstract painting. Picasso, who as we know never made it through to absolute abstraction, needed the spatial drawing to make the line literally 'graspable' as an object.

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<sup>16</sup> Blok, *ibid.*, p.63 and p.80.

<sup>17</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Über die Formfrage* (1912), quoted in Werner Hofmann, *Grundlagen der modernen Kunst*, Stuttgart 1978, p.291.

This 'intermezzo' has to go into a little more detail, for here we fetch up at a central problem of the art-historical approach to 20<sup>th</sup>-century art. The implications of the 'reification' of the artistic means introduced by early abstract painters have never been fully understood in large areas of the profession. A self-referential work of art in terms of *l'art pour l'art*, i.e. a work whose artistic means (line, form, colour etc.) are regarded as 'things', touches on issues of a philosophical and cognitive-theoretical tradition which were heralded by Kant's 'thing in itself'.<sup>18</sup> Here Kant was taking into account the scientific knowledge that our perception of things does not tally with the things in themselves, and that what is perceived thus remains essentially enigmatic. All perception is interpretation. A question like 'what did the artist want to express with that line?' imposes upon the line its time-hallowed referential character and ignores the fulfilment of its function as a thing in the total picture – as a structure (Mondrian), as a dynamic element (Kandinsky), or as the trace of physical movement (Art Informel).

Of course it takes a strong dose of abstractive capacity to see a line drawn on a surface as a thing. To us, things are three-dimensional, and ever since the cave-paintings the line has had a representational function. This probably accounts for the difficulties we still have in following Kandinsky through to the final consequence.

Sculpture is a different matter, for here we really do have three-dimensional objects which we can see in reference to other objects. By placing things in reference to one another and to our knowledge of them, by ordering all this and deriving a structure from it, we can grasp reality without really understanding it. That is perhaps the most general description of our most common method of appropriating reality. It is also the most suitable method for dealing with a sculpture in a public space. It sounds almost too banal to be credible: efforts to persuade the public to accept a sculpture in a public area must first and foremost be directed towards reminding the public of its own ability, put daily into practice, to deal with situations which raise questions. It is necessary to remind people of familiar behaviour patterns, because their view of these banalities is distorted by clichés and prejudice, and also because television and advertising have trained us not to ask questions.

## BACK TO THE NAI SCULPTURE

Eliminating prejudices might give the public its first chance of getting to grips with the sculpture, because the sculpture refers to the location, and the public is familiar with that location or can experience it – or had they perhaps never perceived it properly? De Vries offers the following explanation for his 'solution': 'The NAI building is not closed off at the top. On the opposite side of the pond is the archive building. Its height and curve conform with the surrounding structures. In the hole between the two buildings, for that is how I see the pond, I wanted to have an active line. An image for the entire surrounding part of town and at the same time confirmation of the pond. That is why the form and colour are expressive. There are three exact points, but yellow is the spokesman, so to speak.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> 'What things-in-themselves (regardless of ideas about how they affect us) may be like, is entirely beyond our sphere of cognition', in: Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Critique of Pure Reason), Riga 1781, p.285.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Moscoviter, *ibid.*, p.9.

The more structural description of the spatial situation in the first part of the quotation might have come from Richard Serra. In addition, and this is hinted at in the second part, there is something about Auke de Vries' public commissions that makes them attractive as objects in themselves. This is all the more surprising because they are generally abstract. Cor Blok was on the track of that 'something' when he compared Auke de Vries with Claes Oldenburg.<sup>20</sup> He justified this ostensibly strange comparison by saying that both formal idioms originate in everyday reality. Oldenburg spectacularly enlarges commonplace objects; one of the reasons for their success could be the 'aha' of recognition they induce in the beholder. Auke de Vries is also inspired by his visible surroundings but the sources of that inspiration cannot usually be recognized in the sculptures. Even so, there is something 'blown-up' about them: even the 16 x 32 metre NAI sculpture clearly shows that it is a true-scale enlargement of a 75 centimetre model he put together with his own hands in the studio. What is enlarged is less an object than the act of its making, and the big sculpture seems to retain the fragility of the design – although structural engineering makes this impossible of course.<sup>21</sup>

The father of structuralism, Claude Lévi-Strauss, in a foreword entitled 'La science du concret' to his book 'La Pensée Sauvage', described artistic creation as merely the construction of models of reality.<sup>22</sup> To illustrate his point, he himself employed a model: the model of the '*bricoleur*', a potterer or amateur constructor. He wanted to show that artistic creation is not as extraordinary a phenomenon as people tend to believe. The model was often used to make a primeval human, and also the artistic, mental process, understandable. I offer my own paraphrase of the Lévi-Strauss model here because of its evident analogy to Auke de Vries' method and to the appearance of his sculptures. The *bricoleur* must make do with what is at hand – a collection of materials and tools which he has kept because they might come in handy one day. He inventories this arsenal in order to find answers to his problem within the limited possibilities offered by the whole. He duly examines each item to see what it could 'mean' to him. During the construction process every decision to use one item or another brings about a change in the total structure. In the final result the original function of many components can still be recognised, but this recognisability is forfeit to the total project, within whose scope its new function is more structural. The result will never be precisely what the *bricoleur* intended, and so he speaks not only *with* the objects he has used but, unintentionally, *through* them as well. Without ever fully realizing his original project, he always – deliberately or otherwise – puts something of his own personality into it.<sup>23</sup>

The procedure adopted by Auke de Vries differs from this model in that he firmly refuses to formulate an artistic project. Since the possibilities are already limited by objective basic conditions (surroundings, budget), he rejects the addition of self-imposed limitations.

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<sup>20</sup> Cor Blok, *Autonomie in opdracht*, Museumjournal no.4, 1990, p.31.

<sup>21</sup> Auke de Vries pointed out to me that not every model can be enlarged, and that a model must possess an intrinsic monumentality to render it suitable for enlargement.

<sup>22</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, Paris 1962, pp.33-47.

<sup>23</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *ibid*, pp.28-32.

The design process seems comprehensible – any potterer would feel able to copy the model. The fact that the process remains visible in the technically ambitious, big sculptures is what gives them their ‘esprit’. The NAI sculpture is a particularly good example. I have already mentioned the tousled mop of hair. The central ‘yellow’ referred to by Auke de Vries above could be an abstraction of an electric light bulb (de Vries strenuously denies this) – the beholder is ‘enlightened’.

The difficulties Auke de Vries has often encountered in realising his public commissions have never led to the disastrous fate suffered by Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc*. On the contrary, like the Maas sculpture, the NAI piece, too, has acquired a nickname (‘Joint’), thus attaining landmark status. This could have to do with the processes responsible for the sculptures’ characteristic recognisability, processes of a distinctly frivolous nature. Topographical analysis of a structure as proposed by Serra calls for a willingness to settle for a certain degree of abstraction. Both artists, however, take into consideration the location of a proposed sculpture. The location thus becomes part of the sculpture – actually generates it, as it were: ‘What I absolutely want to stress here is this: you analyse the area, the use of the location, in the social sense of traffic too, summing up: everything a city has to offer. But you can’t make a sculpture with that. The surroundings don’t dictate the sculpture, the sculpture isn’t derived from them. It’s hard to understand, but sculptures develop themselves. ...to me that means that I lapse into a state of impotence every time, where there is no knowledge and everything is impractical.’<sup>24</sup>

## CONCLUSION

‘Self-developing sculpture’ is beautifully illustrated by the Lévi-Strauss pottering process, in which the potterer has only a limited control over the result. It is thus less a process than an event, which Lévi-Strauss defines more generally: ‘The event is nothing but a contingency mode, whose integration (perceived as necessary) into a structure generates aesthetic emotion...’<sup>25</sup>

Only recently has science been willing to admit that contingency is the most universal principle of developments<sup>26</sup>, that its history does not tally with the eternal laws of nature and is hence unpredictable. Hard though it may be for us to accept this, even the history of the human race – including our most banal daily occupations – is determined by contingencies. Herein lies the more profound truth of Joseph Beuys’ much quoted statement that art is life and everybody is an artist. Here, too, an approach crystallizes into a better understanding and the acceptance of sculptures in public spaces. Public decision procedures, fund-raising, structural engineering calculations, weather, architectural space, prior public hearings – all these are contingencies which play a part in a sculpture’s realization but which reach far beyond the boundaries of the limited art context, thereby opening up an approach for a lay art public.

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<sup>24</sup> Auke de Vries, *Oriëntatie*, in: *Kunst bij rijksgebouwen, deel 4 (lezingen)*, ed. Ministerie VROM, Rijksgebouwendienst, The Hague 1991, p.24.

<sup>25</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *ibid.*, pp.28-32.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life – The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History*, Penguin Books 1989, p.284 ff.

Once a sculpture is in place the only further contingencies are destructive: public rejection, vandalism, decay. Guidance for the public while the project is being carried out and after its completion – guidance aimed at breaking down prejudice and at persuading the public to identify with the sculpture – is vital. The isolation of our art institutions must also be borne in mind, for not everybody can be assumed to be familiar with contemporary art. Once a sculpture is widely accepted as a landmark – a status comparable to that of a memorial – vandalism and decay can be forestalled within limits. The designation of an owner responsible for upkeep is in any case essential.

*Translated from German by Ruth Koenig*

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The Centre for the Study of Sculpture  
The Henry Moore Institute  
74 The Headrow  
Leeds  
LS1 3AA  
Tel 0113 246 9469  
Fax 0113 246 1481