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Portrait of the artist as a philosopher

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Abstract

The response asks about the relationship between artist and audience in the RAAAF artworks. Is the artist an Autonomous Innovator who breaches the ties with the past and the environment? Or is the aesthetic practice located in the creation of relationships around these objects, hence expanding the artwork by using know-how, experiences and enthusiasm of the audience/users?

Keywords

Ethnography, audience

Handling Editor: Julian Kiverstein, Amsterdam University Medical Centres, The Netherlands

I respond to Erik Rietveld's inspiring lecture from two angles that correspond to my own work. First, I relate it to talk about 'innovation' as I encounter it in attempts to implement new technologies in care practices. Second, I link it to a material semiotic understanding of art that comes from my work on aesthetics in everyday life. I ask what the artwork and the artist become in the artistic practices Erik describes, and, which is a particular interest that my focus on everyday life practices brings with it, what the *audience* becomes.

First innovation talk. Care practices are pestered by passionate innovators who want to turn care practices upside down in order to find a crucial place for their very-important-new-technology-that-will-change-everything. The technology would make everything better, more efficient, better quality, patient empowering and what other promises have you. These would-be innovators use tropes like 'creative destruction' and 'social disruption'. They scorn the 'resistance' that comes from 'conservative' participants in care practices who 'block the way to change and innovation' in their ignorance and attachment to 'how we have always done it'.

In Erik's story I see an ambivalence as to how *art* (rather than technology) can be this innovation. On the one hand, Erik uses comparable tropes, such as 'breaking habits' 'radically different' perspectives and socio-material practices, 'provocations' and the idea that cutting open a monument is a form of destruction rather than creation. The Artist, capital A, emerges as a Heroe who may lift the audience out of their everyday lives

and bring them to higher places. They had got stuck in their routines, but the Artist points to the way out.

These metaphors for innovation are rather violent. They signify a breach with life as we know it, a revolution that breaks with what was, rather than an evolutionary process that patiently incorporates historical moments, and develops from the practices, values and capacities of the spectators.

On the other hand, Erik's lecture presents artworks as material semiotic entities, relating to different 'layers of meaning' that are already there but are made to surface through the artwork. In the work of the cut monument, for instance, the layers of meaning are made by practices such as international heritage, defence against invaders over land, the eternal fight of the Dutch against the sea, specifically the flooding disaster that hit Zeeland in 1953, and the idea that museums should *preserve* things rather than re-create them. The artworks are 'site specific' and evoke the meanings (that may be) attached to it. Here, the artist emerges as the

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curator that Erik mentions, the person who situates the artwork and evokes the layers of meanings.

This latter idea was strengthened when I visited the exhibition of the RAAAF brothers in the Amsterdam KNAW building. The brothers made quite a point of their need for craftsmen to materially create the artworks. The craftsmen knew how to cut the concrete, how to melt huge amounts of metals and how to wash away concrete from its iron frame in large buildings. This is certainly not a classic idea of what is an artist, as a skilled producer of art. Rather, the artists here bring the *imagination* to design work that brings out the particular meanings of the artworks. They are philosophers, composers and designers, rather than sculptors, musicians or painters who use their bodies and instruments to craft art.

Interestingly, the artists *do* use their (and other peoples') bodies to learn about materials and setups. They touch the sandblocks and try out alternatives to sitting. Yet when they do this, they are positioned as *audience* rather than artists. They are trying to witness and sense the possibilities of material affordances. This practice communicates *dependencies* between artists, materials and users/audience, rather than autonomy.

So, is the artist an Artist, like an innovating engineer who breaks with and radically destroys what is there by pushing shiny new devices, freshly taken from the drawing board on people who have to figure out how to live with them? Or does he or she play with meanings that are already there, to create relationships between people and materials that build something more dispersed than a certain object here and now?

Take the project of the sandblock. One of the interesting things about the sandblock project, I find, is that it is unclear where it is going. There are hopes and dreams, but the project is also a fantastic open-ended test case, where others are invited and involved. If it is going to lead to better uses of the sandblocks remains to be seen. This purpose relies heavily on what others will bring. But the artwork, I would suggest, *are* the interactions and relations sandblock assembles and the new futures it hence helps shaping. With a little help from the artists/curators, who emerge here as the builders of connections between the art-thing and the audience. This audience is not passive, but actively involved in the making of art – they are part of the (making of the) artwork itself, which is a community of sandblock-visionaries and sandblock-materialisations.

It is striking to read how many others are involved in *all* the RAAAF artworks. There are researchers, journalists, other artists, authors, all helping to make the artwork and expanding it. The art seems to be in the *making* of the artwork. This is an artistic practice and artwork in one, one that creates links and ties

between things, audiences/users and different places and meanings.

The metaphors are not violent, with autonomous actors ruling over others and over history, but it is primarily relational. 'Affordances' are possibilities created for use. But people may respond differently. It is part of the creation of the artwork to learn about these responses, and incorporating them. By making people hang around in test office spaces, by making them wonder about bunkers, or by making them hug sandblocks.

Cutting the bunker open, then, is not the same as *destroying* it. It is done in a very controlled, purposeful and aesthetic way. Nothing of the bunker gets lost or falls apart, it is all there, and even better: the inside becomes accessible for the audience too, to add yet different layers of meaning. How would it feel to be a soldier in this enclosed space? The bunker may be heritage, it is not unique. There are many more of them, and aesthetically they are certainly also a bit boring to look at. Cutting it open adds an aesthetic dimension by showing new/old layers of meaning. I suspect that is for these reasons that the keepers of the monument would have wanted to go along with the work anyway. They got involved in the artwork, where they would most probably have rejected its mere destruction.

The title of 'the end of sitting' seems to lean more towards the Artist as an Innovator. Sitting has to 'end', chairs may be demolished, even though the good old chair has always done – and still does – some good services for humankind. Still, if one ignores the bold title, the artwork emerges as relationally as the other works. The end-of-sitting environment suggests new ways of disciplining the body, by supported standing and hanging around. People had – and have – to try it out, and from their experiences, something new and liveable was created. I have been in one of the RAAAF artworks where sitting was made uncomfortable and one had to move around during the meeting. It was a great experience! Yet it was not, I would argue, a *mirror* held up by the artist teaching us about our bad habits of conducting a meeting while sitting. The work afforded the bodily experience of the people living in it, and needed them to recognise their 'meeting habits', by suggesting different ways to conduct it. It is an interactive play between audience, artists and artwork. It is a creation of the material playgrounds that Erik suggests are helpful for embedding new technologies – that are just as much relationally open things as artworks are. It is to play with meanings, affordances and ways of behaving, rather than suggesting a complete break. This is up to the art 'users' who need to expand the artwork by taking it up in particular ways.

The RAAAF artworks inspire me because they pose the question: How to live differently? But they do not present a radical break with things one may have thought of as important. It rather poses the question

how to live with stuff that is already here, also morally dubious stuff like Nazi-towers and ammunition plants. How to live with this heritage as best as possible?

One could only wish for such relational artists to make a case for new technologies in care: through mobilising experience and passion, rather than destruction and blindness to history.

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