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A Kind of Imagination that has Nothing to Do with Fiction: Art in Public Life

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2017

document version

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citation for published version (APA)

Day, J. W. (2017). *A Kind of Imagination that has Nothing to Do with Fiction: Art in Public Life*.

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Summary

This document brings together transcripts, notations, photographic recording, and written reflections that cumulatively form an account of a six-year investigation into the status of art in public life.

Public life is explored as a non-generic term, drawing upon the work of Hannah Arendt, in particular through Fred Dewey's elaboration upon it.

The framework of the exploration was not theoretical but rather practical: inquiry, speculation, experimentation, and reflection, upon and within concrete circumstances, undertaken interwoven with other people, their own efforts, in opposition and collaboration, enmeshed within public affairs and political events.

The project was supported as a pilot project by NWO / Mondriaan Fonds to develop models and methods for Doctoral work in the arts.

The project focussed primarily on the potential existing in art institutions as organs of civil society. In practice, this translated into parallel explorations: an art vocabulary of commemorative descriptions of political life, places and actors; experimentation with organizing different forms of public cultural events; and, by necessity, deep rooting of the project within public life. Ultimately, political issues were not only reflected upon, but strong stances were taken: against the 2011 budget cuts to culture in the Netherlands, amongst others. Results of these efforts were mixed, and reveal a decidedly non-utopian defence of culture and public life.

The project included an experimental and collaborative exploration of the work of Hannah Arendt, with a focus on its meaning for culture, drawing upon the work of Fred Dewey, which served as a discursive accompaniment to practical efforts, and at the same time a kind of public project of its own right.

The emphasis was not, however, on theoretical developments, but on establishing a kind of working knowledge, developing upon existing strategies and traditions as the basis for experimental application, itself with the potential for further extrapolation in practice.

This document itself serves as a binding narrative layer upon these diverse efforts which further share a common vocabulary: commemorative gestures of exemplification undertaken in public.

The design of the document was developed specifically for the production of the dissertation, not for any further publication, precisely in order to support the organisation of a coherent account.

The aim for a civic meaning and status for art making did not address the struggle within art and culture between myth and knowledge, the practices of organized science and those of organized religion, the latter of which must be acknowledged as the undeniable foundation of the visual arts in the Western tradition.

Further, questions of “artistic knowledge” or “research” have not been addressed. In retrospect, the project did not take into account the way that the development of Doctoral work in art in Europe is itself implicated in shifts in public policy and political decisions. When the European Union hierarchizes “Creative Europe” over “Culture” (as they recently did) at the structural policy level, does the new focus on “research in the arts” stand on the side of culture, or “creative industries?”

As a pilot project to explore Doctoral level study in art practice, education itself was not a subject of the project, but invariably some conclusions emerged from the process. Namely, that for Doctoral work in the arts to have any legitimacy, such efforts must be supported with the broad freedom that artistic experimentation depends upon, even to the point of testing the normal operations of the academy.

Second of all, amidst concerns about the legitimacy of the Doctorate of the Arts, intellectual rigor and validation seem less likely to emerge from formalities or metrics like “word-counts” (which can easily be fulfilled by bad faith “gaming the system”) than through fidelity to the traditional role of the promoters and supervisors, in which evolving evaluative criteria cohere into a basis for judgement. The human, personal, awkward, ambiguous, challenging, caring, hurting, healing, disappointing, fulfilling, demanding and generous aspects are precisely wherein rigor and integrity have been found to emerge from.

The conclusion details the judgements that emerged from these experiments, and the epilogue indicates the shape of the work that has and will proceed from those conclusions.