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stitutes the public (Dewey, 1927: 15-16). Every
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The sign in Lelylaan and the urban regenera-
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About 12 years ago, I was a communications
consultant for one of Europe’s largest urban re-

generation projects in what is known as Amster-
dam Nieuw West, a series of post-war neigh-
bourhoods with a bad reputation. Every day
while travelling to work, I passed a neighbour-
hood called Lelylaan. At the neighbourhood’s
entrance, a sign declared, in large steel letters:
‘Lelylaan Leeft!’ (which can be translated as
‘Lelylaan is Alive’ or ‘Lelylaan is Lively!’). The
slogan was somewhat cynical, albeit unintention-
ally so, because it described the area around it
so badly. It was located right next to Station
Lelylaan: a dreary location, not lively at all, but
rather a place you’d want to leave as soon as pos-
sible. The railway station was blocked by large
fences most of the time, police and private se-
curity patrolled the area almost continuously
and, if they didn’t, junkies and dealers haunted
it. Thus, the sign had an almost Soviet absurd-
ity to it, stemming, it seemed, from the belief
that simply declaring the neighbourhood lively
would make it so.

Both this sign and the urban regeneration
project I worked on are what Sander Bax, Pas-
cal Gielen and Bram Ieven, editors of Interrupt-
ing the City: Artistic Constitu-
tions of the Public Sphere, would call interruptions of urban real-
ity. Such interruptions, they explain in their in-
troduction, are events that intervene in ‘the flow
of the social, media and economic forces that
make up the public sphere’ (14). Out of such
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Imagine the public sphere. However, the sign in
Lelylaan is merely the transmission by the state
of the desired public space, whereas art, as the
editors put it, ‘is always a representation of real-
ity [...] that quickly becomes a comment or cri-
tique on that reality’ (20). Artwork invites peo-
ples to respond, through play, to the alternative
public space it proposes and is therefore much
more bottom up.

One could also say, as Erik Swyngedouw
does in his contribution to this volume, that art
offers the possibility of insurgence, often direct-
ed exactly against the top-down transmission of
‘being a public’ that is exemplified by the sign in
Lelylaan. As the facilitator of play, art directly
intervenes in today’s cities and their otherwise
highly commodified public spheres. If the ‘crea-
tive city’ propagated by Richard Florida and his
ilk commodifies the inborn human tendency to
play, art provides spaces for play that are not
made useful and valuable, for play that stands
outside the reach of neoliberal capitalism. In
other words, art constitutes an alternative public
sphere by providing the opportunity to be un-
productive and by helping people imagine alter-
native ways of being a public.

This active resistance to neoliberalism and
analysis of such resistance in the world of art is
characteristic of the Antennae series, of which
Interrupting the City is the twentieth instal-
ment. Like most other volumes in this series, it
offers an enticing mix of academic analysis, in-
terviews with artists and thinkers, and contribu-
tions by artists reflecting about their artistic
practice. As the introduction to another volume
in the series explains, the idea is ‘to gently or-
chestrates a polyphonic conversation in which
the singular voices of individual artists discuss-
ing their own creative practices are equally im-
portant as the more scholarly contributions’
(Cools & Gielen, 2014: 10). The result is almost
always food for thought, with more space for
essayistic approaches than in regular academ-
ic publications. All this gives the series the feel
of a cross between an academic journal and an
art magazine. Indeed, considering the frequen-
cy with which new volumes in the series appear
(more than 20 in 10 years’ time), one could won-
der why it doesn’t take the shape of a periodical,
richly illustrated and distributed widely, so it
could reach a larger audience.

Here, as in many other volumes in the series,
the enemy is neoliberalism. Art and creativity
are pitted against it as agents of change, obstruc-
tive interventions in the oiled radar work of the
smoothly running neoliberal machine, but also under threat of being commodified themselves. One may take issue with such a partisan approach, which always runs the risk of saying ‘art is’ when really meaning ‘art should be’, or discarding art that doesn’t fulfil this lofty task as ‘not real art’ (à la Adorno). However, it is this willingness to take sides that gives this series its unique flavour and critical edge, addressing an interested and intelligent reader who could, of course, always disagree. The series in general and this volume in particular are thus themselves interruptions, aiming to constitute a public sphere through their polyphonic approach (with polyphony itself already a counterweight to neoliberalism’s tendency to standardise).

It is significant that this volume is the first in the series in which literature plays a central role. Before, the focus of the Antennae series was on the visual and performing arts. This probably has to do with the fact that two of its editors – Bram Ieven and Sander Bax – are specialists in Dutch literature. In any case, one can applaud this broadening of scope and hope that this trend continues. At first it may seem slightly surprising that literature is given such a central role in a volume about the public sphere. Thinking about interruptions of the public sphere brings to mind more physical interventions, such as Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s installations, which entice their audience to enter into solitary or communal play with light and shadow in public spaces. Literature seems almost to be at the other end of the scale when it comes to the ability to have an immediate impact on urban realities.

However, the editors – referring to Jürgen Habermas’s classic essay, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere – remind us that the literary public sphere in many ways paved the way for the public sphere of modern times, providing ‘a training ground for a critical public reflection still preoccupied with itself’ (15). As the essays in this volume show, literature has lost none of that quality. Sander Bax writes about the interrelatedness of Joris Luyendijk’s banking blog and Tom Lanoye’s novel Gelukige slaven. And Odile Heynders places a wonderful close reading of Italo Calvino’s Invisible Cities alongside expats’ descriptions of their experiences of European cities, reminding us that, in the words of Calvino, ‘the city must never be confused with the words that describe it’ (a warning that those who placed that sign in Lelylaan should have taken to heart).

Vanessa Joosten’s contribution about Bart Moeyaert’s 2006 and 2007 stint as Antwerp’s Poet Laureate shows what happens when a poet gets caught between top-down and bottom-up attempts to regulate and control the constitution of a public. She illustrates how the institution of City Poet has a fundamentally schizophrenic nature, incorporating both the transmission of ‘being a public’ by the state and the artistic intervention in that very transmission by the individual artist.

The other contributions to this volume offer equally rich reflections on other art forms, either analysing the interruption of the public sphere and the possible publics these interruptions may constitute, or functioning as such interruptions themselves. Tessa Overbeek is present – as she is in several other volumes in the Antennae series – with a thought-provoking piece on circuses. She interviews veteran New York circus performer Jennifer Miller, who presents circus as the artistic interruption of the public sphere par excellence. Indeed, is there any more titillating intervention in the urban public sphere than the circus coming to town? That event, probably in some form or another as old as the city itself, may be more successful than any other in tearing out the demarcations of urbanity itself, when a nomadic troupe of performers invades the sedateness of the settled.

Similar interruptions are presented in other contributions. These range from the performance art of Rennie Tang and Sara Wookey, in which everyday urban actions are used in a choreography that then interrupts those very actions in the public sphere, to installations by Sarah Vanhee that transmit the screams of those who are normally kept out of the public sphere: prisoners.

Not blind to the pitfall of presenting art as a utopian practice that will correct all the wrongs of the modern cityscape, the volume also republishes a harrowing 2005 essay by Gregory Sholette. It describes his dawning realisation that in the neoliberal city’s celebration of the creative class, art and artists have become the unwitting allies of gentrification; Lelylaan Leef! in a fancy dress, one could say.

In the final essay of the volume, Pascal Gielen offers a way out of this commodification of art and creativity when he suggests that the creative city is only one stage in the evolution of urbanity. He predicts that it will be replaced by the common city, in which ‘the neo-tribal crowd becomes political’ (295). In such a city, art will leave the museums and theatres to be like the circus coming to town: interrupting any hegemony so that the city always remains in a constant (Deleuzian) process of becoming. It will therefore be fundamentally open to everyone, unlike
the gentrified urban sphere of the creative city, which is fundamentally exclusive. With that idea, the volume ends on a utopian but utterly enticing note, promising a city that is truly alive and lively, rather than merely described as such.

Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar

Bibliography
