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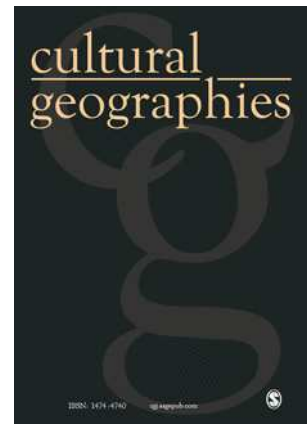
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# The search for publics: Challenging comfort zones in the co-creation of public art

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## Abstract

This article reflects on a workshop as a space of possibility to encounter actual publics, explore the relationship between publics and experts and imagine alternative realities for public-art practice. In a workshop that the author convened at the invitation of the local cultural organisation Lokaal42 in Helmond in the Netherlands, participants were challenged to transgress comfort zones by enacting and negotiating desired prospects for public art. This article critically attends to the notions of co-creation and (dis)comfort in the light of transformative positionalities as part of the workshop (and its role-play element in particular).

## Keywords

co-creation, comfort, discomfort, public art, workshop, the Netherlands

## Prelude

When being interviewed in the Dutch regional newspaper *BN De Stem & Brabants Dagblad*, I took the opportunity to argue that public-art practice would remain disconnected from end-users if it pursued 'intellectual self-gratification'.<sup>1</sup> I made a plea for public-art practice to

show firmer commitment to involving everyday publics.<sup>2</sup> The news report was picked up by the cultural organisation Lokaal42 in Helmond, a mid-sized city in the Dutch province of North Brabant. This city advertises itself as 'surprisingly different'.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, I experienced its central public artscape as dominated by a homogeneous trail of bronze sculptures. Lokaal42 invited me to host a workshop ('*Kunstlokaal*') for members of the public. I was enthusiastic about this invitation and accepted it. At the same time, I felt pushed out of my comfort zone, expected to 'walk the walk, and not just talk the talk'. Lokaal42 distributed a call for participation through local news media. A total of 16 people turned up to participate in a 2-hour workshop at a city-centre café on 16 May 2012, which infused a feeling of a pleasant, cosy atmosphere.<sup>4</sup>

This article examines the co-creation of public art and especially attends to how (dis)comfort demonstrated as inherent part of the workshop as it was practised. I opened the event with a brief introductory talk about my positionality as cultural geographer with a strong affinity with Dutch public-art practice. Participants then completed a paper questionnaire in which they were asked to indicate their background, cultural interests and knowledge of public artworks in Helmond. They were also queried about what roles they ascribe to these artworks and how they envisage public participation in local public-art practice. The questionnaire ended with a mental-mapping exercise to describe and draw an imaginative map for a Helmond-based public artwork as desired by participants.<sup>5</sup> A moderated group debate followed, where participants exchanged views from their questionnaire responses. The debate encompassed a role-playing element, with group members subdivided into policy-makers/experts (who held the power to decide) and publics (with the power to have their say).

## Co-creation and (dis)comfort

In line with Osborne's new public governance paradigm, I argue that public art should be dialectically contemplated as *professionally produced* by public service agents and socially *co-created* by the *voluntary* engagements of everyday publics.<sup>6</sup> The workshop opened a space for voluntary citizenship participation, which remains an underexplored theme in public-art research. Self-selected, real-world publics encountered each other and participants navigated between real and role-play positions of 'publics' and 'experts'. In real

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life, some of the participants actually held positions of professional expertise in the arts policy sector. During the workshop, public art was co-created both discursively and imaginatively by thinking, writing, drawing and discussing.

Although there is extensive academic literature on the potential 'benefits' of material public artworks for space and society, there is little knowledge about how public art operates as a lived concern, particularly with regard to how it is put into operation through activities involving publics and experts.<sup>7</sup> The workshop served as simulation and specifically attempted to reveal how academics might benefit from the participation of non-academics. As conveyed by Mason et al., such participation involves a practice of co-creation that enables a reciprocal confrontation between the academic concern with *knowing why* things are done (*episteme*) and practitioners' and end-users' concern with *knowing how things* are done (*techne*).<sup>8</sup>

A particular area for further attention is the implications of such episteme–techne relationship for 'comfort/discomfort' within public-art practice. Pickerill points that (dis)comfort is fraught with disciplinarily meaning and therefore ontologically multifaceted.<sup>9</sup> Bissell indicates that (dis)comfort is often linked to the business rhetoric of thinking 'outside the box'.<sup>10</sup> In this article, I conceptualise discomfort as the experience of taking someone, or being taken, 'out of the comfort zone'. So, what does it mean to encounter different/(un)familiar people and perspectives and, hence, to be in a social space of (un)desired belonging? Bissell argues that the feeling of comfort may be extremely beneficial, a sensation through which an individual may derive a sense of security. Individuals may remain within their comfort zone *precisely because* it is a pleasant feeling. Conversely, to be uncomfortable is regarded as a highly undesirable sensibility and something that should be minimised at all costs.<sup>11</sup>

In the workshop, I engaged with comfort/discomfort. I did not so much as an oppositional category and corporeal attribute in itself (e.g. joy, content, annoyance and anger), but I understood comfort/discomfort as dialectically situated in the workshop's dynamic social relational space. I approach (dis)comfort as a corporeal sociability, seen through the complexity of bodily exchanged sensibilities, which, following Longhurst, render bodies as fluid boundaries.<sup>12</sup>

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Moreover, I construed the social relational workshop space, as per Amin, as micro-public where social difference was encountered, and accordingly, views and beliefs were concurrently negotiated in friction or communality.<sup>13</sup> Amin alludes to this with 'situated multiplicity', which he describes as the 'throwntogetherness'<sup>14</sup> of bodies, mass and matter and of many [assumed] uses and needs in a shared physical space'.<sup>15</sup> I, thus, conceived of the workshop as more-than-human milieu in which public art was co-created along matter, corporeality and ideas.

Unlike Amin's engagement with the natural occurrence of real-world situated multiplicity, I intervened in everyday public-art practice by the workshop taken as meta-real-world laboratory to deliberately elicit any experiences of (dis)comfort. There was a compelling trajectory of (dis)comfort as embodied by myself, too. First, through media outlets, Lokaal42 and I searched for publics as participants and we displayed an open hospitality. I then travelled to Helmond to make a bodily appearance at Lokaal42. At the event, I presented my background, after which I asked participants to disclose theirs in the questionnaire. A group debate revealed the evolving perspectives of participants, particularly when the participants-as-publics were encouraged to think about for whom public art is made and for which various purposes. The search for publics *among* the publics was complicated further by the role-play that transformed publics–expert positionalities (which ambiguously rendered the co-creation of public art as a comforting and discomforting amalgamation of episteme and techne). Also, the analysis of the qualitative data opened up new zones of (dis)comfort. I continue my article by presenting two brief vignettes illustrating occurrences of comfort/discomfort as manifested during the workshop. The first vignette bears on the issue of (non-)consensus and the second vignette on a critical call for further public participation.

### **Vignette I: (non-)consensus**

A recurring theme in the plenary debate was the experienced (dis)comfort regarding the way in which commissioners and public officials had traditionally engaged with public art in Helmond (to attain alleged 'public support' as higher goal). Some participants valued the input of experts, also in public-art processes contemplated as bottom-up. Others questioned the level of creativity if public art were solely based on general agreement between experts and publics: 'in this way nothing or nothing special would get off the ground', a respondent

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play-acting a policy-maker said. Other participants were concerned with the artwork's autonomy and felt uncomfortable with stepping into the field of expertise and, hence, the artist's authority. As they expressed, co-creation should be primarily limited to encouragement and place-specific dialogue *prior* to the actual materialisation of the artwork.

As conveyed by one of the participants, 'residents should give the artist input and inspiration at the early stage, for example by telling stories about the place and providing themes. Then it's the artist's work area, who is the one that should create'. However, some workshop members suggested that there exists a delicate equilibrium between, on one hand, planning out everything carefully in liaison with publics and, on the other hand, leaving room for surprises for the publics. While one of the participants strongly emphasised the importance that 'the public should be given a chance to think along [artists and planners] throughout [the entirety of public-art projects]', another participator argued that a public artwork might potentially arise as a present for the publics. However, according to this respondent, this should import an *announced* process rather than 'surprise attack': 'at least it is appropriate to give local residents notice of when an artwork comes into being'.

A number of respondents commented that they were not at ease with a substantial number of artworks in Helmond, which remained indecipherable to them. They, in their actual publics' role as well as play-acted role of expert, postulated that public-art practice should precisely take up a strong communicating role that is connecting rather than disembodiment everyday publics – in this context, Amin uses the Angel of the North as successful example for creating a community identity.<sup>16</sup> One participant was critical of some of the existing abstract public artwork on display in Helmond, describing the ideal as 'not an ugly, mutilated and half-amputated abstruse sculpture'. A different member of the workshop argued that power should be vested in the people while addressing the importance of publicly supported aesthetics: 'local authorities usually don't know what pleases our eyes ... Let the people decide on the artworks that appear in front of our doors'.

## **Vignette II: 'ask me'**

A participant had a tendency to monopolise the conversation (perhaps reflecting this respondent's professional role as communication officer at a regional arts knowledge centre). Notably, this person appeared ready to assume greater responsibility as speaker and

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moderator. 'Ask me to come to the stage!' is what this participant wrote on the questionnaire's cover sheet. The will to take up the position of the 'other', and hence to invert publics–expert relationships, was also echoed in other questionnaire responses and within the debate, which occasionally created moments of disturbance and irritation on the part of some. One of the survey questions asked about whom should make the artwork as desired by the respondent. Another participant (an art teacher and artist in professional life) communicated what might be understood as self-interested observation, namely, *he* should make the new public art. This respondent sketched a meeting place where an abstract yet interactive and most of all temporary artwork (which was left unspecified) should appear on a central square surrounded by key social and cultural facilities (i.e. shops, schools and cafés). Also, other respondents strongly believed that exploring and implementing temporary public-art forms can potentially dispel much of discomfort on the side of both city planners and publics (as there might be perceived fear of artwork that is permanent).

For one of the participants, temporary public artworks could be quite powerful in that they may have a feel for everyday social issues and promptly respond to the needs, crazes, emotions and senses of people to boost genuine community 'ownership'. Some respondents argued that some cities, Helmond included, have a tendency to commission international artists largely detached from residents' local quotidian realities. For some, co-creation should not just imply a parallel experts–publics activity but involve actual *mutual cooperation*. A participant pointed that feelings of pride, public appreciation and social bonding were engendered when an artist worked in close cooperation with residents in a local neighbourhood and primary school children in particular for the metal sculpture *Boom van Respect [Tree of Respect]*, of which each branch represents textual connotations of respect and living together. Another participant indicated discomfort with the underrepresentation of the female figure in Helmond's public-art collection. She used the workshop as opportunity for aligning others (especially other female participants) to argue in favour of a gender-dissenting public artwork. According to her, this would subvert local male-dominating public-art practice. She had a female and also male local artist in mind for this job and argued that the male artist could equally well do it and even make a stronger statement by doing so. The respondent imagined and drew an object representing a

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dancing female person, which she envisaged at the location of a former central theatre that was burnt down in 2011.

Nevertheless, some participants were resistant to or eschewed the mental-mapping exercise. They judged it too much of an act of blueprinting that should be precisely avoided in public-art practice. According to them, this practice should flourish from informal, grassroots interventions rather than ideas implemented from the design table. For critical participants, the workshop reinforced the hegemonic model of public-art production in real life. When asked to portray the desired artwork on the questionnaire, one of the critical participants drew an image of what resembled as an ice cream coupe beside a palm tree. I rendered this sketch as antipode to randomly plopped artworks that often ensue from top-down planning practices putting masters rather than publics in the spotlight. This participant's (serious or light-hearted?) response somewhat trod on my toes. I experienced that some antagonism emerged in the workshop: participants employed the intimate atmosphere of the workshop to create an ambivalent ecology for reinforcing and subverting play-acted roles as well as positionalities in real life. I realised that the workshop as micro-public simulated the (dis)comforting practice that is often part and parcel of the 'throwntogetherness' of public-art practice. I discovered the imaginative mapping exercise and the transformative play, in the vein of Amin, as a 'symbolic projection of wonderment'.<sup>17</sup>

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## Notes

1. 'Geen intellectuele zelfbevrediging op straat'. Interview in *BN De Stem & Brabants Dagblad*, 23 March 2012, <[http://www.zebracki.org/docs/BN\\_De\\_Stem\\_Zebracki.pdf](http://www.zebracki.org/docs/BN_De_Stem_Zebracki.pdf)>.
2. I based my plea on my previous research: M.Zebracki, 'Does Cultural Policy Matter in Public-Art Production? The Netherlands and Flanders Compared, 1945-Present', *Environment and Planning A*, 43, 2011, pp. 2953–70.
3. See <<http://www.helmond.nl/English>> (1 May 2015).
4. The workshop was administered in Dutch. The translated quotes equal the original meaning as much as possible.
5. See J.-J.Gieseeking, 'Where We Go from Here: The Mental Sketch Mapping Method and Its Analytic Components', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 19, 2013, pp. 712–24.
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7. For critical syntheses, see T.Hall and I.Robertson, 'Public Art and Urban Regeneration: Advocacy, Claims and Critical Debates', *Landscape Research*, 26, 2001, pp. 5–26; M.Zebracki, R.Van der Vaart and I.Van Aalst, 'Deconstructing *Public Artopia*: Situating Public-Art Claims within Practice', *Geoforum*, 41, 2010, pp. 786–95.
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12. R.Longhurst, *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 2001).

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15. Amin, 'Collective Culture and Urban Public Space', p. 8.
16. Amin, 'Collective Culture and Urban Public Space', pp. 18–19.
17. Amin, 'Collective Culture and Urban Public Space', p. 18.

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