

Closing a Circle, or Fitting Square Pegs into Round Holes

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There is only one way to define and understand one's practice: through retrospection. Distance in time allows one to review and reflect on past actions and makes it possible to decipher that which at the moment of its occurrence remained indecipherable. Looking back at the short history of Public Space With A Roof, an artists' run initiative founded in 2003 in Amsterdam, it is possible to identify some of its defining characteristics and to sketch a provisional line of development.

PSWAR was founded by a group of friends and graduate art students who wanted to investigate both their position within the art system and the agency that this position possibly entails. Since then, it has become a place where a multitude of voices can be heard, where open questions are more important than closed answers and where the prevailing aesthetical questions that haunt the art world are submitted to critical interrogation. The primary objective was not to create a pseudo-utopian space where fake freedom would be imagined, but to acknowledge existing boundaries in both social reality and artistic production, and to examine how these boundaries can be challenged or even transgressed.

The thread that runs through and connects the various phases within the development of PSWAR is the transformation of space, in both an architectural and a social sense. The forty-two square meters space, located in the former Film Academy, exists on the dividing line between a gallery and an artist's studio. Through it hundreds of people have passed, either as participants or as public, all of them leaving behind their own individual mark. This space has been the conceptual basis of PSWAR's large-scale projects, which each involved the construction of a specific installation intended to spark off further discussion and to create new spaces in which works of other artists would be hosted. In those installations, different artists with different positions were invited to participate in an unusual structure in which their works could exist both autonomously and as a quote in a larger chapter. And so, rather than imposing preconceived ideas and conclusions on the public, those installations provided a comfortable space in which the audience could freely discover the wonders and mysteries of each individual work.

Each project started with a set of questions and ended with a set of new questions that were subsequently transferred into the next project. In a sense, *Beauty Unrealized* concludes the three previous projects that were all aimed to pose questions about both aesthetic and ethical values.¹ On the formal level, *Beauty Unrealized* dealt with the possibility of creating art objects that can be transformed into a space in which different works and opinions can be encountered and in which art and theory can co-exist on an equal footing. The main framework of the project has therefore found its material manifestation in the shape of a library, an object that grew and evolved during time, staying open and transparent to the public, who could freely engage with its content.

In order to research the present status of beauty – understanding beauty not in terms of an object's internal

quality but in terms of its effect on the beholder – we invited 94 persons of different professions and different backgrounds to submit lists of items or things that have inspired them professionally and privately. The result was a very personal library, a strange monument in which different intimate worlds came together. Hence, the subtitle of the project: *spider webs of personal universes seeking a form*. Visitors to and users of the library were encouraged to become inspired by the items on show and imagine the persons behind them, freely creating new readings and meanings. The two main sources for the project were Aby Warburg's concept of the library and Jean-Luc Godard's film *Histoire(s) du Cinema*, both of which disturbed and deconstructed official linear narratives of (art) history. By including a wide-ranging variety of individual positions and by giving primacy to personal and often very intimate stories, *Beauty Unrealized* attempted to offer new perspectives on the past and on the status of objects within this past. The library became a productive means to discuss diverse interpretations of the concept of 'beauty', rejecting some of its 'classical' misreadings while creating a space for possible tension and conflict where new meanings and forms could originate.

Every two weeks, the library space was also used to host events by artists whose work was inspiring to us because it engaged with the project's main questions in new and valuable ways. Many of them produced new artworks as a reaction to the library and its content, creating their own versions of reality or questioning the previously established framework. These interventions raised a continuing discussion on the conditions that make a work of art a timeless source of inspiration and on the qualities that allow art to surpass any temporary, linguistic or other contextual limitations. The main credit for the project's success therefore goes to its many contributors, people who dared to experiment, who enthusiastically participated in new collaborations, who were committed to test the limits of their own mediums and who made their works-in-progress openly accessible for examination and criticism.

This publication is the testimony of these collaborative ventures and symbolizes the closure of an important phase within the history of PSWAR. It attempts to recreate the experience of past project and events and examines the possibility of translating the multi-dimensional time and space of the gallery into the one-dimensional pages of a book. The various texts together form an eclectic document that structurally follows the project's phases, while also combining visual and semantic traces of past events with the current preoccupations of the contributing artists and theoreticians. Therefore, it is not merely intended as a trace of the past, but as a source for future inspiration. It marks the end of a phase within the history of PSWAR, but at the same time it should also help us to break free from the past and inspire us for future projects. After all, the urgency to discuss important issues through and with art will never cease to exist: the need to find ways to fit square pegs into round holes will never disappear. Taking its cue from Simon Sheikh, who once said that society and social institutions are as much fictional as functional, PSWAR's future activities will remain dedicated to research new ways of imagining the future as a space for new fictional models and new social structures. Because it is our firm belief that art can still have its say.

1. Intervening the Urban Void (2004); Relocated Identities (2005); Pixels of Reality: What Do You Know, What Do You See? (2006).