

HIEKE PARS

Saturday morning

If Utopia exists, then it is certain to be found on Saturday morning. The Saturday morning is a lovely moment in time. Having just woken up, we hang around yawning without a trace of guilt, savouring a breakfast that takes longer than usual, with all the time to read the weekend papers and supplements, postponing intended activities for a while. *Hieke Pars* loves Saturday mornings. If Mohammed Benzakour's¹ comment is right that 'as an artist you like to visit in people's homes', then she would be perfectly cut out for that part. Such mornings provide her moreover with a rare glimpse into an enhanced community life with most people in and around their homes. On these occasions she is able to communicate with a public who for once is not hampered by everyday stress and thus obviously sensitive to subjects that dominate her public practice of the arts such as topical social issues, the condition of our urban housing and architecture, and the relationship between metropolitan scenery and sound.

Hieke Pars is a visual artist. Creating images will always remain her first motif no matter how engaging her work, how urbanised her orientation and how striking the soundtrack, i.e. the sound of public space which is an intrinsic part of her work, might seem. Her images have a strong cinematographical impact due to the way she staged and directed her interventions in public space. Their unaffected and authentic representation generates a very likely reality which however will never be despite the fact that they are simple events based on quotidian familiarities.

Consequently, on a lovely Saturday morning in Zaandam she had a group of women all beating their rugs from their balconies at the same time.² However normal this might have appeared, this spectacle would never have happened in everyday reality. Collectively beating rugs occasionally used to be an old ritual, which was meant to keep to a minimum the inconvenience of dust. In this way the neighbourhood would only suffer from clouds of dust sporadically. In our individualised community the beating of rugs collectively has not only grown into an anomaly, it has been eradicated altogether from the urban scenery. Regulations require that we beat rugs at the back of our houses on the walkways. Would beating rugs collectively be a form of protest? Does it signify the physical presence of a specific group in the public domain?

Elsewhere, also on a Saturday morning, a marchingband is moving through the Puntstraat in Rotterdam. This ancient Dutch weekend ritual might seem a nostalgic reminder of the days of *Kruimeltje* and *Pietje Bell*³, when instrumentalists and percussionists briefly disturbed the everyday routine, drawing people in to the streets. However, there are no longer people living in this street, the

¹ Mohammed Benzakour, a writer and publicist, in *InterAkta* 5 September 2002, Metropolitan reflections on Art & Public space.

² -Perim, beating rugs-, an art project by Hieke Pars, 17 May 2003, Zaandam, the Netherlands

³ *Kruimeltje* and *Pietje Bell*: two popular books for young people with stories that took place in Rotterdam in first half of the 20th century, written by Chris van Abcoude

Puntstraat is empty, yet the orchestra keeps blazing away.⁴ The street, temporarily covered with grass matting⁵, marks the end of 'urban renewal' and the beginning of 'restructuring' and is the last reminder of a time when the local government cared for social housing before it handed over its interests to market-orientated real estate developers. Does this marchingband celebrate the end of urban renewal or is the process of privatization festively being ushered in?

On an enormous building site in the centre of The Hague in an abandoned edifice with unlimited potential for temporary, clandestine accomodation for homeless people and artists, Hieke Pars made a sculpture from rolled-up blankets.⁶ From this object issues the sounds of radio stations with alternating French and Hindustan commentary about The Hague. During cold nights the blankets are used by vagrants and other dispossessed and then neatly replaced in the mornings. This seemingly chaotic, clandestine housekeeping has shown itself in its blanket sculpture to be more orderly than supposed to the outside world. Do addicts and vagrants try to improve their image by this? Are they seeking attention for their manner of existing? Or are they extolling the vacancies in the heart of the city of The Hague and does this sculpture function as a festively hung flag? The images of Hieke Pars are essentially inspired by sprawling social occurencies and discussions, but it remains unclear precisely which questions are being asked. Questions and answers are left to the participants and the spectators of her public work.

Sound does remain an essential part of her work. Hieke Pars' earlier work consisted predominantly of silent images: projections of trees in abandoned houses, films of girls swinging in warehouses on industrial terrain, the hiphop billboard on the Rosenveldstraat in Rotterdam. These works have almost a purely aesthetic quality. In her more recent work the soundtrack has become as significant as the image. The sound of beaten rugs generates a fascinating composition. She has mixed the recordings of the fanfare with the rythmic sound of piles being driven into the ground, which is so characteristic of the Bospolder-Tussendijken neighbourhood. The combination of blankets with radiosounds has resulted in a special and contemporary sound structure that would not be out of place in one of the 2012 Architects' paviljons or AVL-Ville.

Her images and sounds explore the relationship between the public and architecture. It is not necessary to be a passionate art lover to notice that the architecture in Hieke Pars' work is much more than just décor or as carrier of image and sound. Visual artist Raphael Lozano-Hemmer classifies this form of public art as 'relational architecture'. Buildings and streets are used interactively, and so, being manipulated by users as well as spectators, come alive. Thus, precisely those Saturday mornings have a lot of potential users, who moreover posses the time to fulfil a leading role in Hieke's urban images. The pulsating flat building in Zaanstad is a wonderful example

⁴ -the Fanfare-, an art project by Hieke Pars and Karin Keijzer, 15 June 2003, Rotterdam, the Netherlands

⁵ -Instant Park-, an art project by Hieke Pars, Karin Keijzer and Villa Catherina, 6 July 2003, Rotterdam, the Netherlands

⁶ -Blankets and Radiosounds-, an art project by Hieke Pars, a project that was part of the manifestation 'Sloop Zacht' (Demolish Softly), 1-4 September 2003, The Hague, the Netherlands

of 'relational architecture' but also the grass matting in the Puntstraat or the blankets in the Hague squat. They are furthermore images that easily stick in one's mind as having something sentimental and resembling a musical refrain. I expressly use the word sentimental, because as you all know many 20th century artists had a total dislike of music, because of its ability to nestle directly in the mind. The public that participates in Hieke's work often represent a forgotten or neglected community (Turkish housewives, vagrants and addicts, displaced residents), also the architecture figured often has a similar status. The flat building in Zaanstad resembles a typical east german edifice and is known in the local vernacular as the 'suicideblock'. The Puntstraat is more a street of public shame and neglect than a select district singled out by the fanfare. The fenced-off Hague squat has no rationale for existence and deserves to be promptly levelled. It is these endangered forms that Hieke not only brings into focus, but also reevaluates and subsequently charges with recognition and respect. No wonder that housing associations and the Dienst Stedenbouw & Volkshuisvesting⁷ are charmed by her public artworks. Not because she 'glamorizes' ugly places, but because her sketches contribute to a reexamination of urban development and city planning.

If, during this exercise in art transformation I have to describe an image that will remain with you when confronted by the work of Hieke pars, then I would mention the Saturday morning. While the politician and the social worker are enjoying at that moment their weekend rest, as an artist she departs to immortalise in form that nether hour in time. Beating rugs, blazing fanfares and rolled-up blankets as visual and artificial reflections on our metropolitan everyday lives.

Siebe Thissen

October 2003

Siebe Thissen is public art director for the city of Rotterdam at the Centre of Arts. He writes about the arts, public space and popular culture

⁷ Department of urban planning and housing