Everything is Relevant
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Prix de Rome Commentary
In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau drew a distinction between “space” and “place,” according the meaning of “practiced place”—that is, shaped by historical subjects who constantly redefine its use—to the first term, and according a configuration of discursive stability—that is, under the command of the law of the proper—to the latter term. Certeau thought of “space” as a fomenting point of mobility and resistance to the enshrinement of power and locatedness in “place.” “Space is fundamental to any exercise of power,” Foucault famously wrote. Both Certeau and Foucault identified spatial practice in political terms. After all, what is public space if not political public space and, by extension, what is public art if not, to some degree, political public art—art that is concerned with the expression of new and diverse political and cultural imaginings?

Today, the status of public space is challenged and diminished in a social environment in which property rights have primacy over both individual rights and collective rights. The possibility of social integration, which is suggested by the idea of a shared urban space, is increasingly negated by systematic displacements of peoples from one another or, somewhat conversely, by the subsuming of people into the spectacular narratives of privatist sign systems that saturate the public sphere. Baudrillard argues that the problem of Debordian narratives has dissipated into an “ecstasy of communication” crisis, a crisis revealed not only by the loss of public space but also by the loss of genuine private space. For example, television continues to be conceptualized as existing almost entirely in the private realm of the home, whereas, in fact, its presence is significant in a wide range of public and semi-public spaces, from building foyers to subway station platforms. Consequently, the amount of space that is produced outside the surveillance and influence of the dominant culture is small and ever decreasing. Art that can lead to a better understanding of public space—that is, art that can produce space which resists this crisis, however provisionally—is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve.

Such thoughts came to mind when I was honoured by an invitation to assist in the jurying of the 2003 Prix de Rome Art and Public Space competition. Issues of identity, especially along the interfaces where languages and cultures meet and often collide, have long occupied my interest as an artist. I have also been concerned with the problem of how to insert a now artistic (utopian) language into the commercial sign system of the street without falling into the trap of a lot of public art, which ends up functioning as little more than a private version of public welfare.
I was first of all intrigued by the almost lapidary name of the competition: Art and Public Space. This name is inclusive, suggesting a dimension of philosophical interchange between the term “art” and the term “public space” that would not exist if the title of the competition had been the more commonly used form of Art in Public Space. The use of the term “and” suggests art as a supplement to public space and not necessarily as an integrative operation to or in public space. The name suggests a competition in which no semantic or aesthetic construct is foreclosed from consideration a priori. Art and Public Space suggests an openness of possibilities in the ways of thinking about both terms, of art and of public space. Intangible concepts such as truth and reality could be explored without any narrowing prescriptions or orthodoxies of thought concerning public art. The very process of measuring can influence that which is to be measured. In being so named, the Prix de Rome competition declares itself open to critical self-examination regarding its role and performance in terms of its own positioning in any examination of art and public space.

The adjudication process began with a rapid run-through of slide images from unnamed artists who were referenced only by a number. There was strict insistence on protecting the anonymity of the applicants and, except for the artist’s statement that accompanied each of the respective dossiers, very little background information was offered by the officials of the Prix de Rome. This condition of anonymity, along with the quick viewing of the transparencies, emphasized the importance of an immediate impression. At first, I thought there was something positivistic about this process of viewing slides as so many Rorschach inkblots. There seemed to be an unspoken theory underwriting this procedure that tied the conditions of instantaneity and anonymity to the space of self-evidence and pure response. As is often said, first impressions can be deceptive; more so when slide images stand in for the actual work. The jurors were trusted to pursue their initial, visceral responses, which could then lead to further and more sustained viewing of a particular work. There was also the logistical problem of addressing the many applications in as fair and efficient a manner as possible. For better or worse, time and practicality must be considered in any such large competition. All the jurors were aware that every jury process has to have rules and that it was up to them to navigate such structures so that the process did not disfavour good applicants whose works required slower viewing and greater attention.

As the adjudicating proceeded, there were a number of repeated disappointments. The slide selections made by certain applicants seemed to be rather a hodgepodge, and in some cases even indifferent to the
necessity of providing the jurors with some sense of an intelligent and intelligible artistic narrative. Such lack of understanding of the demands of a juried competition betrayed an artist out of touch with the exigencies of contemporary curatorial operations. It suggested an artist with no sense of the political negotiations that are inscribed, for better or worse, in juried art competitions. There were also applications from artists who had no grounds for entering this competition, their work having no relation whatsoever to the specified category. One artist, for example, submitted a dossier of expressive nude renderings with no substantive artist’s statement appended. For this artist, the competition was akin to a stab at the lottery. What seemed important to me was that such examples indicated that no applications had been screened or disqualified beforehand as inappropriate for the category, something often done in other competitions, such as that of the Canada Council. In the Prix de Rome competitions, there is no prejudging of any application by screeners; the panel of jurors considers every application and it is the jurors who are entrusted with making all the evaluations.

There were several very good applications but far fewer than the jury had hoped, and a discussion ensued as to why so few good applicants had come forward. Sixty-six had applied, and twelve were short-listed for brief discussions about their work before a final four candidates were determined. There were some comments about the amount of time and energy that would be called for once an applicant had passed the first adjudication stage. Short-listed candidates have only a few months to produce a work that will be scrutinized in exhibition, which, in practice, means putting everything else aside for the Prix de Rome. Was the relative shortage of good applications related to the increasing professionalization of the art world where exhibition opportunities abound in unprecedented ways? Were the Prix de Rome prizes themselves too much trouble for what they are worth, especially when conjoined to what some may consider a narrow window of opportunity to produce work? Is it a case of indifference on the part of artists, particularly Dutch artists? Any artist who has spent the previous two years in the Netherlands is eligible to apply to the Prix de Rome, and it was noted that a disproportionate number of applicants were non-Dutch artists rather than Dutch artists.

The second stage of the adjudication involved fifteen-to-twenty-minute discussions with each of the short-listed candidates. These face-to-face meetings with the artists provided an opportunity for the jurors to test their initial assessments in a more fleshed-out and nuanced setting. For me, the encounters with the artists furnished the most enjoyable and often poignant moments of the adjudication process and
reminded the jurors of the weightiness of their responsibilities. The jury’s expectations were generally affirmed during the meetings and, where the expectation was ambiguous, the discussion offered clarity, sometimes negatively and at other times positively.

I very much enjoyed bantering and sometimes sparring with my co-jurors. We were far from a homogenous group of artists and critics—very different people, with divergent practices. The jury was comprised of artists Antony Gormley, Narcisse Tordoir, Alicia Framis, and myself, and cultural critic Dirk van Weelden. One of the jurors, Alicia Framis, was herself a former Prix de Rome winner and is now a successful and respected artist. The jury noted that many Prix de Rome winners went on to develop solid careers as artists and that the Prix de Rome has been instrumental in the discovery of some of the best artists working today.

After a couple of days sitting in the dark confines of a windowless room of the Rijksakademie, I began thinking about the *Imaginary Museum* of André Malraux. I thought about the many ways that works of art conjure references to other works of art and how all art is linked by the fundamental impulse to communicate an aesthetic effect or meaning. But I was also deeply aware of an opposing approach raised by the *Imaginary Museum*, one that sees the jury process as a decentring from such referential linkages. Rightly or wrongly, I felt there was some irony in viewing numerous images of art projects set in the public realm from within the sheltered environment of a darkened room. For me this raised questions regarding the role of photography in articulating aesthetic resolutions to fundamental contradictions in public space. Documentation is always a problem because the judgment of the jurors is contingent on it, and because original experience can never be retrieved in its full complexity.

The relationship of art to the common contents of everyday experiences is an important theme for many artists working today. A significant number of applicants tilled the ground of the quotidian, often through anonymously executed public actions. One artist had repainted public amenities—for example, a park bench—in different colours. For this artist the point was to reduce the distance between art and

*André Malraux, Imaginary Museum, 1947*
non-art action to the point where they become indistinguishable. “Man must be everyday, or he will not be at all,” stated Henri Lefebvre and, while his words may ring true, they also signal, at least to me, a growing consensus among younger artists that art can no longer declare its goals, and that, if it does, it can only do so in whispers. The strength of art lies in a complexity that is often not apparent, but its strength also lies in its insistence on itself as art. What is important is that the elusiveness of art is something that is discerned not in retreat from social interactions with people and public environments, but in active engagement with them.

Among the entries in the competition, there was notable use of art based on a pseudo-documentary premise that explores the question of mediated reality through the framework of reality television. Some submissions were concerned with the idea of cyberspace as a new kind of public art space. There was very little art as dissent and also few entries involving video installation, which is surprising given its influence in both the private realm and public spaces. Many of the applications expressed good ideas that did not quite coalesce. The most successful works surprised in their treatment of the problem of the diminishment of public space in favour of lived experience and true desire. The best applications were not satisfied to merely blur the lines between art and real life. The work of the final four saw art as an instrument for change; their art provided opportunities for alternative approaches to overwhelming social and individual problems. The finalists—James Beckett, Natasja Boezem, Katrin Korfmann, and Tomoko Take—from diverse geographical backgrounds, all surprised in their inventive interactions involving art and public space. All gave thought to the double-edged role that social-political structures can play in furnishing art with sustenance and in censoring many possible actions.

The Prix de Rome stands apart from many art awards competitions, such as the more celebrated Turner Prize or the Hugo Boss Prize. By its steadfast attention to the evaluative problem of predicating qualities to art, the Prix de Rome can seem out of kilter with an art world that is, by and large, given over to entertainment and marketing values. The Prix de Rome does not reject the art world, but neither does it accept the art world uncritically. The aesthetic effect of art is often created by such paradoxical tensions and, in keeping with this particular competition, possibly no more so than when art is considered in the light of public space.