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## Guerrilla Information Battles: Publishing in Public Spaces

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**ABSTRACT** | Publics are associations of people – both physical crowds and virtual communities (Kelty, 2005; Taylor, 2004; Warner, 2002) – that are actively constructed and sustained through socio-material articulation (DiSalvo, 2009; Marres, 2007). A salient example of such a public-sustaining articulation is the largely unauthorized activity of publishing in public spaces through ‘guerrilla tactics’ such as graffiti, posters, banners, and stickering. As the Cumulus 2025 theme track *Informational Issues* seeks to critically investigate public engagement with published information in its many shapes and forms, the role of urban environments as dynamic and informal political bulletin boards should not be ignored. This working paper presents ongoing research into the built environment as an unofficial platform for political discourse. It draws on research into graffiti, posters, banners, and stickering as media to informally (and mostly illegally) publish political statements in public spaces, and comment on the political communications of others. Of these ‘guerrilla publications’ I have identified distinct types. I use the term *aesthetics of vandalism* to denote aesthetic experiences invoked by specific acts of mischief that target these unofficial publications. Moreover, this paper draws on three self-initiated workshops in which students were challenged to engage in political design (DiSalvo, 2012) through the creation of temporary, site-specific, monumental text installations in public spaces. These case studies explicate several challenges and opportunities workshop participants came across, as the cases render visible some of the ‘designerly means and forms’ participants implemented while seeking to engender public engagement with their political concerns.

**KEYWORDS** | PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT, GUERRILLA PUBLISHING, AESTHETICS OF VANDALISM

# 1. Introduction

In times of hyper-personalized and precisely targeted message content that is dispersed through lightning-fast and ephemeral digital media, one would almost forget the collective, pluriform, and omnidirectional bulletin board that is public space. A collective bulletin board, moreover, made up of mixed media that vary widely in their temporality, materialisation, and state of permanence. Instead of being informed by an ever-growing set of carefully harvested personal data, communications disseminated through public spaces are often targeted at unknown publics that consists of random passers-by. As I shall illustrate in this paper, the omnidirectional nature of these communications does not necessarily imply that the locations in which they are published are arbitrarily chosen.

In this article, the notion of public spaces refers to environments characterised by *various forms of 'publicness,'* both in terms of accessibility and as “spaces for encounters with difference” (De Magalhães, 2010, p. 562). Rotterdam is a good example of a city in which public spaces are actively used as an unofficial and informal communication platform. The city's building facades, infrastructure, and street furniture serve as a lively and dynamic bulletin board that facilitates the largely unauthorized activity of publishing in public spaces through 'guerrilla' tactics such as graffiti, posters, banners, and stickering. These 'guerrilla publications'<sup>1</sup> cover a wide variety of topical content, ranging from advertisements by small local businesses to content about Rotterdam's various subcultures and underground scene; and from communications supporting regional football clubs to unofficial statements that address political concerns. This paper focuses on the last of the above-mentioned categories, where I understand political concerns as circumstances that need *collective action* to change their current condition – a condition which is deemed problematic by a particular public (Dewey, 1927). Public engagement with these political problems and issues<sup>2</sup> is actively constructed and sustained through socio-material articulation (see, e.g., Kolks, 2023; 2024), and publishing in public spaces is a salient example of one of the many ways to do so.

Through guerrilla publications, the relative anonymity of Rotterdam's public spaces is being used to articulate a wide variety of (frequently conflicting) political concerns: from shaming “slum landlords” to warning against “5G hazards,” from addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to problematizing COVID-19 regulations, from supporting LGBTQIA+ emancipation to opposing gender self-identification, from promoting access to safe abortions to challenging fossil fuel industries, from articulating the discrimination of Uighurs to disputing the criminalisation of sex work (for a selection of these topics and how they are being articulated, see Figure 1). As such, the city of Rotterdam's lively guerrilla publishing culture appears to contradict sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's (2000, p. 60–61) suggestion that “public space is increasingly empty of public issues” as it “not much more than a giant screen on which private worries are projected without ceasing to be private or acquiring new collective qualities in the course of magnification.” Contrary to Bauman's observations, Rotterdam's public spaces feature numerous guerrilla publications that articulate collective concerns rather than “private worries,” be it often in *unobtrusive ways*.

<sup>1</sup> In the remainder of this paper, I will use this (inevitably reductionist) shorthand.

<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere (Kolks, 2023) – following scholars such as sociologist Noortje Marres (2007) – I describe the conceptual difference between problems and issues, and its important consequences for design discourse.



Figure 1. Rotterdam's public spaces are being used to articulate a wide variety of political concerns. Source: author.

## 2. Guerrilla publications fuel political engagement

Political guerrilla publications come in many media, shapes, and sizes. Although most of them are published using physical media, many connect to digital communication platforms via URLs, QR-codes, and hashtags. These communications are often materialised as modestly sized stickers and tags that easily go unnoticed, or as graffiti pieces created in lowkey locations such as highway underpasses. Political guerrilla publications, however, can also take on monumental sizes and grotesque forms. A notorious example in Rotterdam's recent history were the large-scale racist slogans – referring to white supremacy theories – that were laser-projected onto the city's iconic Erasmus bridge during New Year's Eve 2022 (NOS Nieuws, 2023).

Illegally projected onto the bridge's pillars from a nearby location, fragments of racist slogans were aired to a nationwide public via a live television broadcast that reported on the festivities around the bridge (RTL Nieuws, 2023). Further fuelled by posts on social media, these locally executed guerrilla publications had an impact on publics well beyond those spectators that witnessed them directly (Bir, 2023). Possibly encouraged by the controversy and media attention it caused, this specific 'guerrilla publication format' was later repeated in the cities of Alkmaar and Eindhoven, with similar slogans being projected onto the city halls of these municipalities (De Bekker, 2023; Polder, 2023).<sup>3</sup> As such, in an era vastly dominated by digitally mediated communications, guerrilla tactics of publishing in public spaces still show their worth as impactful forms of socio-material articulation that construct and sustain political engagement – for better, or for worse.

To identify specific ways in which guerrilla publications sustain public engagement and invoke aesthetic experiences, I have analysed an ever-expanding personal collection of photographs. When possible, I have selected examples written in English for this paper's figures to facilitate readability for an international audience. In what follows, I will first

<sup>3</sup> In February 2023 two suspects – members of the racist activist group White Lives Matter (Bir, 2023; Kraak, 2025) – were arrested for these activities (Polder, 2023). After being prosecuted for insulting a population group and incitement to discrimination, they were sentenced to six months in prison (Kraak, 2025).

describe ways to understand the communications and interactions mediated through guerrilla publications by relating them to social theory on public engagement. Next, I will home in on the specific subcategory of *political* guerrilla publications and the interactions they mediate, by identifying several of these publications' distinct modes and varieties. Finally, I will present three self-initiated workshops in which I teamed up with design students to actively join the unofficial debates taking place in public spaces. In these workshops design students were challenged to address collective concerns through the creation of temporary, site-specific, monumental text installations in the public realm. Three workshops, moreover, that explicated both challenges and opportunities participating design students encountered when trying to engender public engagement with their political concerns through this specific form of publishing in public spaces.

### 3. Understanding public engagement

Publics are associations of people – both physical crowds and virtual communities (Kelty, 2005; Taylor, 2004; Warner, 2002) – that are actively constructed and sustained through socio-material articulation (Dewey, 1927; DiSalvo, 2009; Kolks, 2024; Marres, 2007). Social theorist Michael Warner (2002) argues that a public can consist of a well-defined group of people brought together by an occurrence at a physical space of assembly (e.g., a crowd at a party), but also of an ill-defined community of strangers – a virtual association of individuals, solely unified by their collective *attention to the same communication(s)*. Hence, publics are inherently *unstable* entities that only exist as long as they are actively sustained. To last, they “must continually predicate renewed attention” (Warner, 2002, p. 419). Guerrilla publications are socio-material articulations that seek to construct and sustain publics by catching and renewing their members' attention and interest.

Following scholars such as Dewey (1927) and Warner (2002), anthropologist Christopher Kelty (2005, p. 199) proposes three distinct types of publics: (1) an assembly of bodies (a crowd or an audience), (2) a “topical public” bound by its members' attention to specific communications (e.g., the persons reading this paper), and (3) a “meta-topical public” made up of individuals that imagine to participate in a particular discourse. While the first type of public depicts a relatively well-defined group of people, the latter two categories mostly represent ill-defined, virtual associations of individuals. As these three different types of publics are related to distinct circumstances, individuals are often involved in several publics simultaneously.

Therefore, within the same crowd attending the festivities around Rotterdam's Erasmus bridge on New Year's Eve 2022, some spectators ignored the laser-projected racist slogans while others actively paid attention to them, ‘automatically’ rendering this latter group a topical public. As some members of this topical public might additionally consider themselves participants in the discourse on discrimination and racism, this last subgroup of spectators – through different modes of participation and involvement – partook in three publics simultaneously: a crowd attending New Year's Eve festivities, a topical public, and a meta-topical public. While the New Year's Eve crowd fell apart when festivities around the Erasmus bridge ended, the topical public that came into existence that very day only ceases to exist when people stop paying attention to that night's racist laser projections, just like the meta-topical public on discrimination and racism only disintegrates when its members no longer imagine themselves partaking in its discourse.

Most of the political guerrilla publications described in this paper are not intended to be crowd-pulling events in themselves. Instead, they rather seek to sustain the engagement



of topical and meta-topical publics. As we shall learn in what follows, the transient nature of most guerrilla publications – as well as their often flimsy materialisation – can actually be valuable communicative assets that specifically support their aesthetic appeal.

#### 4. Variations in spontaneity and situatedness

Within public spaces, guerrilla publications are published on platforms such as facades, infrastructure, and street furniture, using media like stickers, posters, the ink of felt-tip pens, or spray paint. While some are one-off manifestations, others are serially produced. Consequently, as some might be the direct creative result of individual spontaneity, others explicitly require forethought, planning, pre-production, and/or outsourcing. Moreover, where some serially produced guerrilla publications are stand-alone entities, others are individual components of (unofficial) overarching campaigns (Figure 2).



Figure 2. One-off publications versus serially produced items, individual entities versus campaign components. Source: author.

Guerrilla publications vary in their degree of situatedness. While some seem arbitrarily positioned within – or randomly distributed throughout – the urban landscape, others explicitly relate to their specific context. Within this latter category, location-specific and contextual elements can intensify both the communication's appearance and meaning. Guerrilla publications can accomplish this via (1) physical interventions that comment on the specific content of other actors' statements in public spaces, for example through *subvertising*<sup>4</sup> (Figure 3). They can also intensify their communicative capacities by (2) tuning their content in to meanings associated with their physical surroundings, or (3) by incorporating elements from their physical location as form components (Figure 3, right).



Figure 3. Contextual elements that intensify guerrilla publications' meaning and appearance. From the left: (1) Location-specific *subvertising* via a billboard that advertises luxury apartments. (2 & 3) The added stickers read "Unaffordable Rotterdam – Stop market forces – Housing is a fundamental right" and "Rotterdam. Is it happening?" (a pun on the city's marketing slogan "Rotterdam. Make it Happen"). (4) A location-specific physical element incorporated as a form component. Source: author.

<sup>4</sup> Writer Mark Dery (1991) coined the term "subvertising" to describe the production and dissemination of anti-advertisements, often through illegal material interventions (see also Dekeyser, 2021).

## 5. Aesthetics of vandalism

One can identify specific ways in which guerrilla publications invoke aesthetic experiences. I understand “aesthetic experiences” as *conditions of intensified attention* in which perceptions and/or interactions promote curiosity, engagement, and/or imagination (Petersen et al., 2004; Ross & Wensveen, 2010). Thus, aesthetic experiences go well beyond encountering pleasure and beauty (Folkmann, 2023; Koren, 2010) as (for example) puzzling, frightening, or repulsive sensory stimuli can also trigger curiosity, engagement, and the imagination. Moreover, instead of regarding aesthetics *intrinsic* features of specific artefacts or conditions, I consider aesthetic experiences to be individually constructed through interactions (Dewey, 1958) that are both informed by biological (Ware, 2022) and sociocultural factors (see, e.g., Folkmann, 2023).

I use the phrase *aesthetics of vandalism* as an umbrella term to describe the ways in which the *violation* of guerrilla publications through specific acts of mischief invokes aesthetic experiences. Acts of vandalism such as tearing away, scratching out, or covering up other actors’ guerrilla publications can bring about “attentional tuning” to these communications (Ware, 2022, p. 52), as the results of these actions can promote curiosity and spark the imagination regarding the political articulations that were removed, damaged, or obscured. Rotterdam’s public spaces host several examples of guerrilla publications that have been cancelled<sup>5</sup> by guerrilla publications carrying opposing messages. Interestingly, the very act of cancelling can *intensify* attentional tuning to the controversy that is being addressed by *both* publishing parties, and unintentionally solicit curiosity to the (literally) underlying perspective in particular (Figure 4). Just like David Carson defends his experimental graphic design work by stating that one should not confuse legibility with communication (Blackwell, 2000), the aesthetic appeal of these vandalised, partly legible, guerrilla publications is increased by the extra effort publics must invest to make sense of their content (see, e.g., Hekkert, 2006).



Figure 4. Aesthetics of vandalism: specific acts of mischief invoke aesthetic experiences. From the left: (1) scratching out, (2 & 3) tearing away, and (4) cancelling. Source: author.

## 6. Students engaging in political design

After describing and analysing other actors’ guerrilla publications, I will use the final part of this paper to share some of my own educational experiences with publishing political concerns in public spaces. Design scholar Carl DiSalvo (2012) uses the term “political design” to denote designed artefacts that support societal conditions of ongoing

<sup>5</sup> I understand *cancelling* as the deliberate attempt to obliterate and/or neutralize the force, effectiveness, and/or validity of a communication (see, e.g., Merriam-Webster, n.d.).



opposition, contest, and engagement with political concerns, through “designerly means and forms” implemented *outside* the realm of institutional politics. As part of an ongoing research into the built environment as an unofficial platform for political discourse, I initiated three workshops that challenged design students to engage in political design through the materialisation of a temporary, site-specific, monumental text installation in public space. These workshops sought to investigate which pressing collective issues participating students were eager to make public, and which designerly means and forms they would use to engage unknown topical publics, made up of random passers-by, with these political concerns.

The end results of all three workshops were executed at locations with relatively high volumes of traffic passing by. However, the workshops varied in their duration, location, and possibilities for students to co-design physical outcomes. The first workshop was a one-day event executed in the city of Breda. Design students were asked to collectively decide upon a text that would be published on a premanufactured framework situated near a busy road (Figure 5, left). This workshop’s brief prescribed that the text installation should address a political concern inspired by a news item published on the same day the workshop took place (4 October 2018). The second workshop ran the following year, this time executed in a vacant interior space at Breda’s central railway station. Its less restrictive brief, week-long duration, and higher material budget gave students more possibilities to co-design the overall manifestation of the workshop’s outcome (Figure 5, centre). The third workshop took place in the city of Den Bosch in 2022, lasted one week, featured an open design brief, and used pre-existing rooftop frames on abandoned buildings near the central railway station as publishing structures (Figure 5, right).



Figure 5. Publishing in public spaces, workshop results. From the left, the signs read: (1) “sharing supposedly is the new having,” (2) “reacting endlessly - hoping for a reply” and (3) “on & on.” Source: author.

In the first workshop, participating design students had to exclusively work with text. As most participants were more used to engage with sensory-oriented design projects, this proved to be challenging – especially within the constraints of a pre-designed output format. Although numerous statements were produced, the phrasing was often rather straightforward, lacking much associative depth, and leaving little room for interpretation. Moreover, the assignment to address public issues was often ignored, as many texts articulated private problems rather than collective concerns. Conversations with participants suggested that a key factor contributing to these results was that students insufficiently *imagined* the publics they aimed to address. They also tended to overlook the influence of site-specific conditions on the formation, composition, and attention span of these publics. The following workshops were therefore set up in such ways that more time was allocated to practice articulating public issues through the medium of text, map specific aspects of the unknown topical publics students sought to address, and allow participants more space to (co-)design the workshops’ physical output.

## 7. Articulating political concerns through designerly means and forms

The second and third workshop's briefs urged participants to consider the formative impact of site-specific circumstances when developing their design proposals, such as variations in velocity and viewpoints provided by different transport modalities passing by the text installation. Moreover, participants were encouraged to vividly imagine the topical publics they aimed to address and empathize with their diverse members' lived experiences. Although both workshops saw participants again struggle with writing evocative texts, private problems were now mostly shunned in favour of collective concerns. Also, more text proposals were indeed being informed by location-specific considerations (e.g. differences between a site's day- and nightlife) and empathy with the varied and ill-defined community of strangers that participants sought to engage.

Thematically, the installations that came out of both workshops articulated social pressures perceived by participants about having to continuously react to an overload of incentives from their physical and virtual surroundings. In contrast to the slow writing phase, participating design students enthusiastically explored the communicative capacities of form, experimenting with sensory and interactive aspects. They incorporated site-specific conditions and strategically considered the deployment of spatial elements, materials, colours, and lighting to intensify the installation's communicative capacities and engender attentional tuning (Ware, 2022) to its political content. In their final designs, participants sought to provoke engagement through curiosity rather than communicative clarity. By intentionally playing with legibility, and by disclosing content information piecemeal, publics were challenged to cognitively invest in making sense of these text installations. To increase their aesthetic appeal through subtle interactions, passers-by had to mentally stitch together letters, words, and characters that were spatially dispersed (Figure 5, right) or read a text fragment via a mirror (Figure 5, centre). In short, instead of opting for straightforward legibility (figure 5, left), workshop participants used designerly means (their aesthetic sensitivity to form and interaction) to translate the social anxieties they perceived into carefully staged *efforts* that publics had to make to both experience and understand the text installations' content and meaning.

## 8. Conclusion

In this paper I have described how the activity of publishing in public spaces through 'guerrilla tactics' such as graffiti, posters, banners, and stickering have transformed Rotterdam's public spaces into unofficial political bulletin boards. Of these "guerrilla publications" I have identified distinct types, and used the term *aesthetics of vandalism* to denote aesthetic experiences invoked by specific acts of mischief that target these unauthorised publications. I have described three self-initiated workshops that can be considered attempts to engage in political design and design activism, as they evoke "revelation, contest, and dissensus" through "aesthetic means and expression" that alter "the condition for urban experience" (Markussen, 2012, p. 50). These workshops explicated some challenges and opportunities that participating design students came across, while also rendering visible the "designerly means and forms" (DiSalvo, 2012) participants implemented when articulating their political concerns through co-designed public text installations. To support the ongoing political discourse in public spaces, I will add my own guerrilla publication to Rotterdam's urban landscape: a custom-designed sticker with a QR-code that directs readers to an online version of this paper.



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