

INTRODUCTION

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The title of this compilation is confusing. *Compassion: A Paradox in Art and Society* may give the impression that, paradoxically, there is something flawed about the compassion that art and society feel for each other. Although the book does touch upon the relationship between art and society, the main focus is on *compassion*, investigating how art can draw attention to ethical issues in our society, and how it can spur us into action. Compassion is a concept which sparks a move from 'we' to 'you' and from 'I' to 'they'. It calls on us to transcend our own individual interests; and society is becoming more receptive to this call, in reaction to a form of politics which seeks, above all, to accentuate differences. In this exploration, the test case is the artwork *Flag of Compassion*.

The artwork *Flag of Compassion*, an initiative of the Dutch artist Rini Hurkmans, examines how the notion of compassion operates in our society. It does so by producing the instrument—the Flag—in large numbers, and circulating it widely. Any individual or organisation can acquire the Flag of Compassion. When they do so, they are confronted with the concept of compassion, and can express visually what they think of this concept. People buy the flag for various reasons, sometimes for their own use, to hang it outside their home to make a statement: that the world, for example, needs more compassion. Or they buy the Flag as a gift for a particular person, to point them to the importance of compassion, or to show that this person has, in their

view, a compassionate attitude towards life. Sometimes people fly the Flag at a demonstration, to make their views known.

At these events, it becomes clear that the artwork *Flag of Compassion* harbours a significant paradox. A flag, an instrument which is used to differentiate oneself from others, seems difficult to reconcile with the notion of compassion, the ability to empathize, which stems from a deep awareness of our sameness. This tension between difference and sameness is the conceptual core of the artwork.

The work, however, also touches upon the heart of the more general paradox marking the relationship between art and society. We harbour vast expectations of art. We want works of art to make our lives more beautiful, better and richer. Art takes us to the edge of our comfort zone, overcomes our contradictions, and makes us the kind of people we should like to be. Yet while recognizing the power of art, we limit this power by setting it apart and restricting it to a separate area. Art means the world to us, but only when it does not get too much in the way of our daily tasks. We agree that artworks are powerful, whilst we do our utmost to render them powerless.

This paradox is not new; rather, it forms the essence of what Jacques Rancière refers to as the aesthetic regime of art. By this he means a system in which art enters into a direct relationship with the world around us, can take possession of anything it finds there, and then return it to the world in the form of an artwork.

This act of attributing meaning, however, can only occur if the ‘stolen’ commodity (view of mankind, concept, problem or urinal) is separated off into a distinct area with its own institutions, own language and own morals. The paradox is therefore necessary—art must be powerless if it is to exercise power in our society—but also means that artworks are given an exclusive role which undermines their claim to make general statements. *Flag of Compassion* plays on this paradox, renders it visible, tangible, a subject for debate.

Starting from the concept of ‘compassion’, this compilation asks questions as to the relationship between art, community and society, as well as the link between aesthetics and ethics. In so doing, it addresses the specific role of art, its autonomy, its place in societal and philosophical debate, and the part it plays in determining human values. This book, however, not only provides a forum for considering the role of art in this discussion, it also participates in the debate by the approach it proposes. It overcomes the distinction between, on the one hand, studies focusing on art itself against a backdrop of theoretical and societal concepts, and, on the other, discussions in which works of art are mere puppets, set in motion by the network of concepts pulling their strings.

The book begins with the artwork *Flag of Compassion*. A conversation between Rini Hurkmans and Pascal Gielen explores the origins and implications of the work. Nick Aikens then looks at the way in which

artworks can retain, or gain, a voice outside a museum-context, while in the following text, Judith Westerveld investigates the way in which *Flag of Compassion* introduces ethical choices into our daily life. The next two contributions shift the emphasis to philosophy: Leonhard de Paepe analyzes the meanings of the concept ‘compassion’, and in an interview with Jesse Ahlers and Judith Westerveld, Susan Neiman calls for the return of moral concepts and values to public debate. The compilation then turns back to a discussion of images and art. Sarah van Binsbergen looks at the power of symbols in our lives. Jeroen Boomgaard, finally, analyzes why, due to the paradoxical relationship between art and society, public artworks often fail to convey a meaning to the public, and how *Flag of Compassion* is able to make productive use of this paradox.

Compassion: A Paradox in Art and Society addresses the fundamental interwovenness of art and society, aesthetics and ethics. The picture which emerges is, indeed, confusing, but this confusion politely asks the reader to take hold of the flag and to consider which concept it wishes to convey.