

Raluca Croitoru (

Concrete Relief by Karla Kaper (1970)

- a presentation by Raluca Croitoru for Z-Files XL, 17 Dec 2019, Rotterdam

The work I chose to talk about today is entitled Concrete Relief. It is an artwork created by Karla Kaper in Rotterdam Zuid's Slinge Metro Station in 1970.

There are several reasons why I chose this work, and I will try to present them today. One of the most important reasons, is the thing that first attracted me this work: its status. It is an artwork that is situated at the threshold between private and public space. As it is located in the main hall of the Slinge metro station in Rotterdam South, in order to access this artwork you need to have a valid ticket with which to check in and pass through the gates.

The fact that the mural is within a privately owned building plays an important part in determining who the audience is and who gets to see it. Concrete Relief is viewed by travellers/passengers on their daily commute to work or other destinations. It is a work that exists in the people's everyday experience and is a silent witness to the daily rhythms of the city and its inhabitants. There are people coming in and going out of the hall, metro trains arriving and departing, doors opening and closing, and escalators starting and stopping.

Through abstraction and playfulness, Concrete Relief engages in an unspoken dialogue with the public. It uses a multitude of dynamic elements and techniques, large concrete elements and steel rebar that are turned into sculptures that seem to be in the process of being created. These elements suggest a work that is not yet complete, still on the move, undergoing a transformation, reflecting the type of public that it addresses and the area in which it is located. When we think about it, ever since it was first opened Slinge metro station has itself been upgraded several times, and many new elements have been incorporated into its architecture. The Zuidwijk-Pendrecht district in which Slinge is located has also undergone continuous transformation, and Rotterdam Zuid in general has seen many major changes and will continue to do so over the years to come.

This artwork offers one small but surprising feature that I very much enjoy. It is an element that I understand to be a subtle invitation to interact with it, encouraging active participation and a slowing down. Part of the relief features two seats, one at each end of the mural, very close to the escalators. I spent time on both of them as I went through the process of trying to understand the work better from an embodied perspective. The seat on the right is very experimental and requires a lot of participation as you consider how to interact with it, how to sit on it, whether to sit on it, how to position your body, which way to face, etc. It presents numerous possibilities and can be a lot of fun as it draws you very close to the texture of the concrete and its monumentality. The shape of the other seat is quite easily recognisable, which makes it much easier to decide how to position yourself on it. I believe this one represents the more contemplative part of the work, dedicated as it is to the daily passenger. It invites them to have a rest, to contemplate, to slow down and take a short break from their daily dash and routines.

Reflecting upon this artwork in particular and public art in general, makes me wonder how public art, which is mostly tangible, can be combined with more intangible art forms (e.g. performance, sound art and light installations), to generate potential for new experiences. For example, in this specific case, I wonder what would change in the individual perception of this artwork and the urban space surrounding it if all of us, some of us, or even just one of us were to visit the artwork for its own sake and spend some time there. Most public artworks are stationary structures set within a dynamic cityscape. They have a certain transitory quality about them because they are usually only briefly viewed by people on their way to something else. I think that by exploring the potential embedded in the stillness of the sculptures, they could help reveal and emphasise everyday experiences, and allow space for fresh, more personal involvement, and create links between the inhabitants of the city and the city itself.

Last but not at all the least, this is an artwork made by a woman, at the end of the 60s, when it was mostly men who were commissioned to create art. To me, this represents one of the work's most powerful aspects that manages to create a strong link across time and space. I believe that although we have come a long way since the 60s, there is plenty of scope for even more change. Yes, more women are involved in the arts and art institutions, and yes, more voices are being given the opportunity of being heard, yet when I think about the future of art, I firmly believe that much more still needs to be done.