



JONAS STAAL

POST-PROPAGANDA

THE NETHERLANDS FOUNDATION FOR  
VISUAL ARTS, DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE

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## ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

## FOREWORD

While artists continue to appeal for their freedom and autonomy, the imperativeness of what they do is becoming increasingly clear. Artists must depict the zeitgeist, become engaged, descend from their ivory towers, go international, nurture a social conscience, make comprehensible work, engage in debate, be conscious of their actions – at least according to everyone with an opinion about art (critics, politicians, curators, policy makers, clients).

The turbulent times of art manifestos in which the artist, flaming and blaming, determined the desired direction of art himself, are long gone. He leaves the arguments to critics, observers, policy makers and curators. The place and interpretation of art, of his own art, in public opinion eludes him.

Considering this, the Fonds BKVB (The Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture) is delighted to have visual artist Jonas Staal contribute to the Fonds BKVB series of essays and examine the position of artist, observer, policy maker and politician. His passionate and critical analysis refuses to deploy Baron von Münchhausen's obvious disappearing act. He does not escape from his own world by pulling himself out by his hair, but instead considers himself a part of the world he is assessing. His main point of critique is that not everyone is willing or able to do so.

The political dimension, as it is for many other contemporary artists, is an intrinsic aspect of Jonas Staal's work. With unrelenting consistency, he continues in that same vein in the essay *Post-Propaganda*. Unlike images, which tend to leave space for the viewer's own interpretation, language forces the reader to follow the

writer's path. In the linguistic universe of Jonas Staal, the concepts of autonomy, necessity, freedom, claiming and producing, politics and art are inextricably linked, perhaps to the point of No way out – as Bret Easton Ellis wrote just as unrelentingly.

Lex ter Braak  
Director of Fonds BKVB

I.

INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

On 8 January 2009, the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant* featured an article by art critic Rutger Pontzen, entitled 'Speel mee met de loterij en steun het museum' ('Play the Lottery and Support the Museum'). He reported on a newsletter sent out by the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam to mark the end of the year. In addition to a list of the exhibitions and programmes initiated by the museum that year, the newsletter 'explicitly called upon the museum's patrons to play the BankGiro Lottery. This would be important, since, according to Sjarel Ex, [the director of the museum], 50 per cent of the proceeds would go to benefit cultural institutions, "including the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen".<sup>1</sup> The newsletter ends on a personal note from Ex: 'I'm playing too.'<sup>2</sup>

In 1996, thirteen years before this newsletter saw the light of the digital highway, the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen presented the exhibition *Viewing Matters: Upstairs*, curated by visual artist Hans Haacke. For the exhibition, Haacke used only artworks that were already present in the museum's collection. He did not employ the usual (art) historical mode of presentation, organised by movement or period. Instead, he organised the exhibition to form a representation of the *ideological* motives which had led the museum to acquire certain pieces in order to legitimate itself within a cultural context. Thus, Haacke did not treat the artworks as autonomous objects, but as markers of the various agendas followed by different

directors of the museum. Through the acquisition of these works they had tried – justifiably or unjustifiably – to secure the museum's right to exist. Haacke absolutely refused to recognise these works as autonomous objects. Nevertheless, they can all be said to belong to a particular *style*, or signature even. In fact, he was consciously aware – insofar as may be possible – of the motives and socio-political background from which these works originated. What he perceived to be the truly important aspects of these artworks was judged according to a value system other than the personal motives of the artists.

Haacke did not consider the artist's signature as a point of departure, but as a minimal part of a larger socio-political network, in which not only the works in the exhibition were interchangeable, but the curators and museum directors too. The aim of *Viewing Matters: Upstairs* was to expose a framework that extended its influence far beyond the walls of the museum. A framework that not only influences or even prescribes *which* art is acquired and exhibited, but also defines and *legitimizes* the *role* of art in the state.

This method is typical of Haacke's work, and he is often called one of the founders of *Institutional Critique* in the 60s and 70s of the last century. In *Institutional Critique*, artists took up the task of investigating a mode of working outside the parameters of the exhibition space and art history as independent fields of research. Instead, they focused on the socio-political roots of *art*: *the art institution*. These artists, generally classified in a *canon* comprising, among others, Haacke, Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers and Daniel Buren, no longer considered the exhibition space to be an uncontaminated space in which to display autonomous objects, generating from its clean and marginal position critique and reflection on a society *outside the exhibition space*.

1 – Rutger Pontzen, 'Speel mee met de loterij en steun het museum,' *de Volkskrant*, January 8, 2009.

2 – Museum Boijmans van Beuningen Newsletter, January 2009.

Instead, they saw the exhibition space an inevitable *part* of a broader social network. From this perspective, the executive power is not to be sought in the museum itself but in other factors which ensure the museum's existence and render it meaningful in a broader social context. The artists affiliated with the research of Institutional Critique claimed that the legitimisation of art has always been defined by a range of social factors, by individuals or organisations that, for whatever reason, have an *interest* in the existence of art as such.

As a concept, artisthood has always been influenced by developments in society, which in many cases has led to abuse of the symbolic privileges ascribed to the artist. I would like to focus specifically on the so-called *ethics of freedom*, which plays a recurring role in this essay. The ethics of freedom is a concept that is deployed whenever the liberties acquired by art come under discussion, as is the case in controversies concerning an artwork that has been deemed unsavoury by citizens, religious organisations or the government. Whenever this happens, enlightened minds, including artists, step forward as champions of freedom of speech and the rightful scrutinisers of society. Their status as artists – and being an artist is still viewed as a direct correlative of the liberties achieved in Western societies that allow for critique of the government and religion – is reason enough for politicians, columnists and other species of opinion makers to perfunctorily defend them. I believe that, especially in the sense used in this essay, the term 'ethics of freedom' represents the accomplishments of the arts as a sovereign *métier*. The arts are represented as a *métier* that should not be interfered with or rudely influenced by opportunistic politics. In this profession, the exhibition space should be a safe haven in which it is unnecessary to be considerate of bourgeois morality or political interests that largely shape the world outside the exhibition space.

In this way, the ethics of freedom can be an important tool for art critics, art theorists and politicians involved with art, who value the idea of art creating its own ethic and transcending the issues of the day, art as a tool to legitimate the current point of view on art. In the arts, the ethics of freedom continues to represent an art that aims for immortality, and therefore should not be limited by the conventions of everyday life.<sup>3</sup>

Institutional Critique conceived of the exhibition space as a *part of power structures* and as such, a direct reflection of the political structures shaping society as a whole, giving it meaning:

Irrespective of the 'avant-garde' or 'conservative', 'rightist' or 'leftist' stance a museum might take, it is, among other things, a carrier of socio-political connotations. By the very structure of its existence, it is a political institution. [...] The policies of publicly financed institutions are obviously subject to the approval of the supervising governmental agency. In turn, privately funded institutions naturally reflect the predilections and interests of their supporters. [...] 'Artists' as much as their supporters and their enemies, no matter of what ideological

3 – The legal proceedings for 'a death threat to a member of Dutch parliament' instituted against me related to my project *The Geert Wilders Works* (2005) is highly representative of this. The fact that I was educated at an art academy determined my social position – that of visual artist – clearly played a role in my acquittal. Whereas any other citizen would only have had to defend himself on the basis his intentions and the relations between these intentions and the actual acts, in my case, the symbolic status of the artist automatically granted me a more 'elevated' position than someone who did not take art (history) as their guideline. This is also one of the points

colouration, are unwitting partners in the art-syndrome and relate to each other dialectically. They participate jointly in the maintenance and/or development of the ideological make-up of their society. They work within that frame, set the frame and are being framed.<sup>4</sup>

Haacke's work can easily be seen as a series of *acts of purification*. Guided by a *good cop/bad cop* principle, several art institutions invited the artist to critically assess them and deliver them from the bad, opportunist interests of the government, corporations and other stake-holders, which together form the *politics of the museum*.<sup>5</sup>

Thanks to artists like Haacke, art institutions were able to prove their capacity for *self-criticism*: by giving these artists their *freedom*, the institutions demonstrated that they had not yet been completely corrupted. The institution would voluntarily let itself be guided by the artist's penetrating and purifying eye and side with the artist whenever the finger was pointed at sponsors like Shell or Philips, corporations that hardly fit the profile of the museum's edifying values, with their exploitation of workers and economic colonisation of Third World countries. Art institutions do not endorse worker exploitation, after all. At worst, they have their security guards stand in front of the same painting for

hours on end, without them having to perform any physical labour other than turning up. And of course it's all done in clean clothes and well-heated spaces. How could anyone object to having these underpaid workers enlighten themselves day in and day out in front of a painting or sculpture? It is difficult to imagine a more radical form of edifying the masses.

In Institutional Critique, the artist became a sort of cleaning service driven by a pure ethic that could be called in to infiltrate the back rooms of the museum and expose its hidden ideological conditions. Art critic Isabelle Graw aptly articulates this strange, sado-masochistic attitude of the art institution vis-à-vis the artist:

The result can be an absurd situation in which the commissioning institution (the museum or gallery) turns to an artist as a person who has the legitimacy to point out the contradictions and irregularities of which they themselves disapprove.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, they disapprove of them, but they also could have easily discovered this *themselves*. Why would a museum or other art institution need an artist to inform it about bad sponsors or investors, when it is responsible for having incorporated them into the museum in the first place? What reason would the museum have, other than a sham one, to contritely hide

of departure for *The Geert Wilders Works / A Trial I-II* (2007-2008).

4 – Hans Haacke, 'All the "Art" That's Fit to Show,' in *Hans Haacke* (London: Phaidon Press, 1974), 104-105.

5 – Besides *Viewing Matters: Upstairs*, Haacke also developed a form to profile the visitors to the art manifestation Documenta in Kassel (*Documenta-Besuchersprofil*, 1972) and focused on the history of the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale, thus placing the pavilion itself in the spotlights (*Germania*, 1993).

6 – Isabelle Graw, 'Field Work,' *Flash Art* (Nov-Dec 1990), 137

behind the indignant artist who has, for example, 'discovered' that a sponsor is guilty of exploiting Third World countries? What reason could it have, other than serving its own agenda?

In itself the term Institutional Critique is a paradoxical construction, as it suggests a critique of an institution that is itself institutional – a critique not simply addressed to institutions and critical of them, but also a critique of an institutional nature, so to speak. The double scene of this critique reminds us of two things – of the deep entanglement between artists and institutions and of the degree to which institutions have determined the shape or direction of works especially made for or about them. One could go so far as to say that they showed artists the way.<sup>7</sup>

Considering Graw's line of argument, it is already possible to speak of a second wave of Institutional Critique. According to this approach, the first wave would encompass the stage in which the art institution is attributed an autonomous status, a status wrongfully influenced by unwanted, external agents wanting to use it for propagandistic means. (For example, by sponsoring the museum, Shell can present itself as humane and progressive, a mask it can don the

7 – Isabelle Graw, 'Beyond Institutional Critique,' in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2006), 141.

moment it is accused of abuses in Nigeria.) The second wave would take the recognition of this conflict as its point of departure: i.e. the untenability of the idea that the art institution has an autonomous basis. This nullifies the purifying capacity of artists as external agents: they were always already inseparably bound to the art institution, just as the art institution is tied to a larger social context. Neither can claim an autonomous, independent status any more. Hans Haacke's view is no longer tenable in the second wave of Institutional Critique because the illusion that the art institution limits itself to the building that houses and exhibits art is shattered. The artist does not simply engage in a temporary working relationship with the museum but is instead an integral part of the institution itself. As artist Andrea Fraser (1965) once said: 'We are the institution of art: the object of our critiques, our attacks, is always also inside ourselves.'<sup>8</sup>

Fraser's work is exemplary of this second wave of Institutional Critique and goes beyond supposed founders like Hans Haacke. In her work *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989), her alter ego, Jane Castleton, asks 'Wouldn't it be nice to live like an art object?' In the first performance of this work, she acted as a tour guide to visitors to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, using equally lyrical terms to describe the art collection, the security guards' chairs, the exit signs and the museum toilets:

8 – Andrea Fraser, 'What is Institutional Critique,' in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2006), 307.

Our tour today is a collection tour – it's called Museum Highlights – and we'll be focusing on some of the rooms in the Museum today, uh, the Museum's famed Period rooms, Dining Rooms, Coat Rooms, etcetera, Rest Rooms, uh – can everyone hear me?<sup>9</sup>

She also includes the institution and its policy concerning both individual and corporate investors as an integral part of the tour:

...for \$750,000 you could name the Museum Shop. You know, I'd like to name a space, why, if I had \$750,000 I would name this Shop, um... Andrea. Andrea is such a nice name.<sup>10</sup>

She later reworked the *Museum Highlights* performance into a video, based on the format of introduction videos often used by museums to promote their wares. Nevertheless, Fraser's script was more than just a hysterical travesty of museum *audio guides*. The script consisted largely of quotations and included over fifty footnotes:

Some of the footnotes were of a more contemplative nature; they developed a theory, indebted to Foucault, about the history of museums in the United States

and also included a discussion of philanthropy and public policy.<sup>11</sup>

*Official Welcome* (2003) is a comparable work, the first performance of which was held at the request of the Maryland Institute College of Art. The performance consisted of a public lecture in which Fraser quoted different people from the art world and blatantly imitated them, pausing occasionally to remove an item of clothing, as if performing a striptease. Acknowledgements, theoretical statements and pseudo-nonchalant remarks about the importance of art or lack thereof followed one after the other, whilst Fraser's state of undress advanced before the audience's eyes. Fraser not only imitated the mechanisms – the unwritten rules of an opening speech – but also the mannerisms, finally concluding by saying 'I am not a person today. I am an object of art.' With these and other statements, Fraser, in contrast to Haacke, does not present herself as a critic speaking from outside the art institution. In fact, her work always acknowledges her dependency on the vocabulary and the (unwritten) rules which underlie the art institution and legitimate her own work and status as an artist: 'I would say that we are all always already serving.'<sup>12</sup>

In the framework created by Fraser, as a representative of the second wave of Institutional Critique, the art institution has no definite shape. It is maintained by the

9 – Andrea Fraser, 'Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk,' 1989, in *Andrea Fraser* (Hamburg: Dumont-Kunstverein in Hamburg, 2003), 244.  
10 – *Ibid.*, 249.

11 – Catherine Taft and Andrea Fraser, 'Hallo, welkom! De vele gezichten van Andrea Fraser,' *Metropolis M* 6 (2007), 36.  
12 – Andrea Fraser, 'How to Provide an Artistic Service: An Introduction,' 1994. <http://i1.exhibit-e.com/petzel/b82e289c.pdf> (accessed December 19, 2009).

communal *frame of reference* that artists and others cultural producers constantly refer to in their writing, speaking and art production. This guarantees both its status, and all the privileges that artists can appeal to as long as they remain 'faithful' to the art institution – and the symbolic privileges of artisthood.

Throughout this text, when I speak of the art institution, I assume the following definition: the art institution is the shared frame of reference which keeps its status as long as there are enough users to legitimate its existence. Examples of this are the ethics of artistic freedom, the creation of certain artistic canons that we constantly refer to (Dadaism, Situationism, Young British Artists, etc.), the importance repeatedly attached to certain art critics, art theorists or art philosophers, or the (speculative financial) value ascribed to certain artworks by galleries, art fairs or auctions. These are all examples that maintain the art institution, but only if the parties involved are prepared to more or less follow or even just *refer* to the unwritten rules of the arts. *Repetition* is therefore essential: only through the continuous performance – the re-confirmation of canons – connected to or associated with the art institution, can it maintain its status and position.

In his essay *De mythe van het kunstenaarschap (The Myth of Artisthood)*, art theorist Camiel van Winkel interprets this position of the museum versus the artist as follows:

Artists who intentionally aim to break with the established image of the artist, if they succeed, will find that they have only confirmed the myth [of artisthood] indirectly. [...] The dilemma for the modern artist is that all his actions must be taken *consciously*, in awareness of the context, situation and the process of his work.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to Graw, Van Winkel observes this troubled position from a conservative point of view. His favourite hobby horse in the dispute about the status of the contemporary art institution (the blurring of the boundary between art and mass culture) does not lead to a reformulation of the socio-political roots of artisthood. In fact, Van Winkel considers this blurring an important 'artistic achievement of the historical avant-garde'.<sup>14</sup> However, in the end this achievement leads to a stalemate, because 'the great power of modern art lies in its capacity for demystification',<sup>15</sup> 'but that capacity is simultaneously part of the myth of modern art'.<sup>16</sup> Contrarily, Graw does not consider this situation – the inevitable ideological intertwining of the artist and the art institute – to be a suggestive endpoint. She takes it as a point of departure: 'I would opt [...] to insist on Institutional Critique's investigative potential [...] while working on new, more adequate, definitions of "institution" and "critique" alike.'<sup>17</sup>

As an illustration of the second wave of Institutional Critique that supposedly made room for the redefinition of the relation between the artist and the art institution, Graw names artists like Andrea Fraser, Christian Phillip Müller and Renée Green. This list is immediately followed by an (indirect) excuse: 'Note how I am reproducing a canon myself now.'<sup>18</sup> This is an aside that is typical of texts written by authors trying to engage with Institutional Critique, but who are constantly confronted with their own

13 – Camiel Van Winkel, *The Myth of Artisthood*, unpublished translation of *De mythe van het kunstenaarschap* (Amsterdam: Fonds BKVB, 2007).

14 – Camiel van Winkel, *The Regime of Visibility*, trans. (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2006), 188.

15 – Camiel van Winkel, *The Myth of Artisthood*, 33.

16 – *Ibid.*

17 – Isabelle Graw, 'Beyond Institutional Critique,' 143.

18 – *Ibid.*, 147.

instrument – language – which seems to have an insoluble defining and definite character, and always seems to be generating new canons. The appropriate question to ask at this point is how an art critic in the second wave of Institutional Critique can relate to his subject matter if he is not even prepared to question his own instrument – in this case, a form of so-called *reflective* writing. In Graw's case, she opts for an indirect excuse, whereas Van Winkel fabricates a mythological image of the artist, which he (according to Van Winkel) cannot possibly escape, because – and this seems to be his adage – 'everything is a myth.' Whereas Graw's comment points up her own problematic relationship with Institutional Critique, Van Winkel's 'solution' is aimed at maintaining his own position: it makes him an indispensable link in the art institution itself. Because the artist himself cannot escape his mythological status, Van Winkel, as a sort of elevated arbiter, can point out the impossibility of continuing his practice over and over again.

Both Van Winkel and Graw's positions are representative of the research of Institutional Critique in general. By extension of Fraser's statement, the second wave of Institutional Critique constantly raises the question of how it could be possible for an artist or art critic who has been shaped, maintained and strengthened by the art institution to formulate this type of 'internal' critique. And is the fact that the art institution has been defined as such by Institutional Critique itself not fundamentally problematic? Is this not the case, precisely because it immediately enables the art institution to maintain its central discursive status? As art critic Jan Verwoerd puts it:

It is precisely the critic of these institutional power structures who does them an invaluable favour, by making

the audience *believe* that the institutional apparatus is the most important, if not the only power determining art production.<sup>19</sup>

Whereas Van Winkel's problem relates to his attempt to secure the autonomous position of art criticism by creating a myth that only he can view comprehensively, Graw's perspective on the second wave of Institutional Critique becomes problematic at the moment she tries, in her own text, to reveal herself as complicit in the creation of artistic canons. This is problematic because it still implies the possibility of sovereign artisthood, a position in which an appeal can be made to the independent status of the artist. In other words, this would entail the possibility of *not* producing canons. A situation in which she would not have to make any excuses, since this would not only suggest that the risk within the discourse of Institutional Critique would be to maintain the hegemony of the art-historical canon, and with it the notion that there could be a way out of this situation in the first place. The fundamental values from which Graw attempts to formulate her critique – that the artist and other cultural producers are by definition connected with the art institution itself – are unsettled by the idea of a possible escape to the margins where a pure critique would still be possible. It would be wrong of me to unequivocally ascribe to Graw my notion of the ethics of artistic freedom which is all too common

19 – Jan Verwoerd, 'Vrijuit liegen tegen het publiek – En andere, wellicht betere manieren om te overleven,' in *Open 14* (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers/SKOR, 2008), 68.

with art critics. However, I will try, in the course of this text, to show that the idea of sovereign artisthood is fundamental for many critics when they attempt to formulate 'new' critical stances regarding the deep-rooted relationship between the artist, the art institution and politics.

Before moving on, it is important to stress that the concept of Institutional Critique already assumes a common project, a shared platform for possible change, but one which continues to have formal relevance. Criticism is only meaningful if one is prepared to take it seriously on the basis of a common ground – in this case the art institution – that renders this critique *recognisable* as such. Escaping from the world to a clean marginal space, a refuge, as the ultimate subversive act, is the ideal of being free of the art institution's power to index everything, an art institution that immediately provides a podium for any form of critique or resistance within its sparkling white walls. Their hypnotic effect immediately lures the artist into taking his place in the ranks of his illustrious predecessors.

II.

CRITICS

In spring 1996, the same year in which Haacke worked on *Viewing Matters: Upstairs*,

[the director of the Stedelijk Museum] Rudi Fuchs was asked during a television interview, whether it would be a good idea to close *Peiling 5*, an exhibition of the work of young Dutch artists that had recently been opened, because of the fuss being made about the exhibition's initiator and sponsor, Shell. The oil company had been discredited because its investments in Nigeria had damaged the local environment, which had subsequently led to local protests and the dramatic prosecution and execution of some of the protesters [...]. Fuchs stated that the staff had indeed considered closing the exhibition, but had reached the conclusion that as long as social or political action had not been taken against the company, there was no need for the museum to do so either.<sup>20</sup>

Art historian and critic Domeniek Ruyters' description of this is intended as a first step towards critiquing the poor political consciousness of contemporary Dutch artists:

Compared to the outspoken positions of [...] foreign artists [such as Hans Haacke,

Lotte Baumgarten, Roland Jones, Klaus Staeck, Tim Rollins and the Guerilla Girls], the attitude of engaged artists [in the Netherlands] is vague, romantic and in a way purely symbolic. Their arguments are much less outspoken and there is no fierce battle to speak of, probably owing to a lack of ideological foundations.<sup>21</sup>

But Ruyters also has his critical moment, and this is the crux of his article:

I also attended [this] exhibition without much reserve and I did not start a personal boycott. Still, the question remains whether a clearer moral attitude vis-à-vis art and the context in which it functions might be desirable, or even necessary.<sup>22</sup>

After this enlightened moment of self-criticism, he still goes on to direct his indignation at the artists:

The complete negation of the[se] problems by the artists [involved in the exhibition] is astonishing. None of the participants felt the urge to respond to the sponsor's conduct.<sup>23</sup>

20 – Domeniek Ruyters, 'Goed en kwaad,' *Casco Issues 1* (Utrecht: Casco, 1996), 22-23.

21 – *Ibid.*, 28.

22 – *Ibid.*, 23.

23 – *Ibid.*, 24.

Graw's moment of desperation is shared by Ruyters' even greater desperation. On the one hand he wants to fully engage in a critique of the socio-politically apathetic attitude of Fuchs and the other artists involved, but on the other hand he is conscious of his own lax attitude as a critic: he attends exhibitions which he loathes on ideological grounds, because he feels that his profession forces him to. Whenever he does so, he puts himself in the schizophrenic position of those who despise the system, but are not prepared to apply the consequences of this contempt to their own work. Ruyters is confused, because he still feels that the artist's task is to show him the light in the corrupted corporate world, a world which, to his mind, contemporary artists should be valiantly warding off like the knights he thinks they ought to be. Still, Ruyters gives them plenty of space to take up this task, so he does not have to:

Only very few artists are prepared to work with and for an audience other than the art audience. [...] However, as long as the artist is not prepared to make that move, and take a little step back from the art world, with its luxury and self-indulgence, their level of engagement will remain half-hearted and scarcely effective. Engagement is more than just another theme, it is not a style or a pose, but a conviction.<sup>24</sup>

Ruyters ambiguously desires a consistent critique which he himself cannot provide. He is used to the consensus of the Dutch art world and the 'lukewarm, moderate political climate'<sup>25</sup> that he despises, but he nevertheless offers the sympathetic reader a way in; he will only have to take a 'little' step back from this moderation, and realise that engagement is not 'just'

a stylistic choice, but requires a 'fierce battle' and an 'ideological basis'. Just a 'little bit' though.<sup>26</sup>

Nothing has made the people involved in the art institution as nervous as the rise and continuation of Institutional Critique. This holds at least for those who would like to keep the *current* form and status of the art institution as it is. Ruyters is an excellent example of an involved person who was convinced that he was a 'mere' observer until suddenly, through his reflection on Institutional Critique, he finds himself an unwanted accomplice in its discourse. Ruyters was not able to resist the temptation of attending the exhibition sponsored by Shell. To legitimate his own awareness of this to himself, he attempts to *join* the avant-garde of Institutional Critique, by – with a flashy nonchalance – not absolving his own position of critique. However, all of this is without consequence. Ruyters has since attended and reviewed many exhibitions sponsored by big corporations. He is even the editor-in-chief of an art magazine that publishes critical and theoretical texts, and which has continued to receive funding from the government during, to name one example, the Dutch involvement in the Iraq war.

*J'accuse* – cried the first wave of Institutional Critique – and since then, the movement has left the art institution with a profound sense of guilt. This guilt is a widely shared feeling in Western societies in the main, which actually relates to living in a society whose ideological foundations we (can) no

24 – *Ibid.*, 30.

25 – *Ibid.*, 28.

26 – In his article 'Politics' from 2007, Ruyters returns to this theme of eleven years before: 'Even though not long ago art used to be the independent, critical observer of social issues, by now it realises very well to what an extent it forms a part of the all-encompassing politico-economic system that holds and controls it. The critique from outside, has become the critique from inside.' Domeniek Ruyters, 'Politics,' *Metropolis M* 5 (2007), 58.

longer subscribe to. The same is true of the art institution whose *corporate sponsors* have settled in the exhibition spaces that were once so unsullied and lofty. But this has not essentially altered the actions of artists and related cultural producers. The cynical aspect of all of this lies in the fact that the people who have reached these conclusions, and would thus be able to lead the way to a different critical consciousness, have not taken any responsibility for their conclusions and instead await the arrival of other, as yet unknown artists to do so for them.

Thus the *political* turns out to be thin ice for the art institution, despite the – unashamed – propagation of its own politics. The former director of the Kunsthal in Rotterdam and the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, Wim 'I don't read books'<sup>27</sup> van Krimpen, and the Vrije Academie (Free Academy) even founded an annex – called Gemak – for 'political art' that would not be suitable for the Gemeentemuseum. (An analogy to Ruyters springs to mind: engaged art is not 'regular' art, and needs a special place to be shown):

I have founded an institute specially for political themes [...], for art and politics. It is an experiment, to see whether it works, to see how much influence we could have with it, and whether we could reach people with it.<sup>28</sup>

27 – Interview with Wim van Krimpen at the occasion of his retirement as director of the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, *Radio5 - Obalive*, January 8, 2009.

In 2007 a small controversy developed around some photographic works by Iranian artist Sooreh Herah. The works were entitled *Adam and Ewald – Seventh Day Lovers* (2007) and depicted images of the prophet Mohammed.<sup>29</sup> Van Krimpen decided to bar the work and was able to use his split museum (a non-political museum with a political annex) to motivate his reasons for excluding it. While he 'has nothing against politically engaged art',<sup>30</sup> he does not want an artist 'to change [his] museum into a platform for politics'<sup>31</sup> and thinks that 'political debates should take place elsewhere'.<sup>32</sup> Van Krimpen's other argument for the exclusion of the artworks was supposedly that the Gemeentemuseum is part of the 'public domain',<sup>33</sup> where politics has no place. He considers a space accessible for anyone – in itself a highly political and ideological notion – to be completely disconnected from any political reality.

Despite the relative insignificance of the events that led Van Krimpen to make these claims, the circumvention with which he attempts to evade the socio-political roots of the art institution is symptomatic. Van Krimpen aims for a free space, in which art can be viewed without strings. He keeps a watchful eye open for the appearance of a moment in which a political reality may suddenly and rudely manifest itself in 'his' public museum. When that happens, the work should be moved to its proper destination, Gemak: a sort of depot for unwanted and so-called politically engaged art where the hundreds of

28 – *Ibid.*

29 – This is in itself a strange fact; in Islamic ideology, there is a strong prohibition of the depiction of the prophet, and therefore there are no 'official' portraits of him: only 'fake', unauthorised images. Within the Shiite tradition however, this is not always strictly the case.

30 – Henny de Lange, 'Geen debat over Islam in mijn museum,' *Trouw*, December 5, 2007.

31 – *Ibid.*, author's emphasis.

32 – Rosan Hollak, 'Ik bang? Absolute onzin! – Museumdirecteur

thousands who visit the museum each year do not have to be bothered by it.<sup>34</sup> (This might be the reason that the annex is located at a considerable distance from the museum.) Art critic Rutger Pontzen also noticed this:

The nearly casual comment [that Van Krimpen made about the museum being part of the public domain] reveals a fundamental issue. If the museum were to become public space, what would happen to the other belief that has dominated the art world for more than a century: the museum as a refuge, that does have rules and laws, but which are different from those that apply on the streets. [...] By making this comment he throws to the wind one and a half centuries of museological ethics of freedom which was more or less initiated by the establishment of the Salon des Refusés in 1863.<sup>35</sup>

What Pontzen means with the aforementioned concept of the ethics of freedom can be found in an earlier article in which he freely and unashamedly speaks about the lack of political consciousness in the Dutch art world: 'The Dutch art scene has never felt a responsibility to deal with socially sensitive subjects, unlike

the art scenes in neighbouring countries.'<sup>36</sup> In the same article, he lists artists Donald Judd, Joseph Beuys and Constant Nieuwenhuis as shining examples.<sup>37</sup>

Concerning the added value of the ethic of freedom as championed by Pontzen, the work of artists with this consciousness should '[show] broad vistas that provide a glimpse of a more just society'.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, Dutch contemporary artists behave like 'social workers and make analyses like professional sociologists. [...] They crawl out of their isolated positions and identify themselves with politicians in order to gain entrance to the very same offices in The Hague (and elsewhere)'.<sup>39</sup> The core of Pontzen's frustration can be located in an article that he wrote about what he considers the dominant system of public art funding in the Dutch art world:

Take this public funding away, and the true international importance of Dutch art will become clear: nought, niente, nada, zero. [...] It is a fake world with fake success and fake attention.<sup>40</sup>

Pontzen tries to make his mark every few months with consistently bitter headlines such as 'Slack Water in The Netherlands'.<sup>41</sup> In several of his articles he makes incendiary claims such as: 'The visual arts lack social consciousness',<sup>42</sup> and other articles claim that art subsidies cultivate a fake world with fake success,<sup>43</sup>

Van Krimpen verweert zich,' *NRC Handelsblad*, December 4, 2007.  
33 – *Ibid.*

34 – In 2007, at the time of the controversy, the Gemeentemuseum reported 290,000 visitors.

35 – Rutger Pontzen, 'Wel van de straat,' *de Volkskrant*, December 13, 2007.

36 – Rutger Pontzen, 'Gebrek aan politieke genen,' *de Volkskrant*, February 1, 2007.

37 – Constant Nieuwenhuis is incidentally, a Dutch artist.

38 – Rutger Pontzen, 'Gebrek aan politieke genen'.

39 – *Ibid.*

40 – Rutger Pontzen, 'Kasplantjesbeleid,' *de Volkskrant*, May 16, 2007.

41 – Rutger Pontzen, 'Het is dood tijd in Nederland,' *de Volkskrant*, August 26, 2004.

42 – Rutger Pontzen, 'Gebrek aan politieke genen'.

or that only one per cent of the museum public has an immigrant background.<sup>44</sup> However, Pontzen fails to carefully articulate his aforementioned frustrations: the relationship between the art institution and politics, and therefore the (lack of) social embedding of contemporary Dutch art. In his failure to do so, he leaves an open wound exposed that has been being discussed more than ever in the last few years: the question of how the state should relate to art and vice versa. We then find ourselves continuing an old discussion, the question of the sovereignty of artishood, the independence it claimed for itself and won during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from its former patrons: state, church, nobility and rich bourgeoisie. This sovereignty demanded a stable basis which it found in the different regulations established by the Dutch state to keep artists, who didn't earn enough to stay alive, in business.

Similarly, art critic Anne Berk claims that art should be a refuge. Although art 'always expresses the predominant vision of society'<sup>45</sup> and has 'often been employed as a visual strategy to package political, religious or commercial ideas',<sup>46</sup> the contemporary artist no longer uses his work to 'advertise products'.<sup>47</sup> She claims that 'the private market has to be stimulated',<sup>48</sup> but to maintain the sovereignty gained by art during the last century 'government support is indispensable. [...] With the help of this money, the artist can be the scrutiniser. We shouldn't mind spending money on that. Our freedom is at stake.'<sup>49</sup> Berk acknowledges the close

ties between the art institution and politics, as it has been analysed by Institutional Critique, but, along with many practitioners in the arts, she shares the idea of art as a refuge. Pontzen looks with nostalgia on the same refuge, even though his idyll of 'broad vistas' offering a view of a 'more just society' pales into insignificance when compared to Berk's blatantly populist claim that 'our freedom' is supposedly at stake. Neither of them seems to be able – or even to feel the need – to elaborate on the conflicting interests of the art institution and politics.

Art critic Anna Tilroe does elaborate on this. At first glance, she does not seem to care about the refuge of art. According to Tilroe, 'art is context'<sup>50</sup> and 'the way in which the artwork relates to the cultural, social, political, and currently, also the economic circumstances typical of era in which the [artwork] was created'<sup>51</sup> should be embedded in the presentation, experience and consideration of the artwork itself. Strikingly, Tilroe does not consider this task to belong to the artist, but to the art critic, whom she charges with the mission of developing criteria to enable the contemporary context-oriented art to acquire 'true meaning' in 'society'<sup>52</sup>:

Imagination and ideas go together just as the wind goes with the ripples on the water's surface. Do not only talk about the ripples, the design, but discuss also

43 – Rutger Pontzen, 'Kasplantjesbeleid'.

44 – Rutger Pontzen en Merlijn Schoonhoven, 'Ze komen niet,' *de Volkskrant*, January 12, 2006.

45 – Anne Berk, 'Waarom wij kunst niet aan de markt over kunnen laten.' February 5, 2008. <http://zonderkunstenaarsgeenkunst.wordpress.com/20080205-anne-berk-kunst-is-een-vrijplaats/> (accessed December 19, 2009).

46 – *Ibid.*

47 – *Ibid.*

48 – *Ibid.*

49 – *Ibid.*

50 – Anna Tilroe, 'Kunst is context,' in *Kunst in crisis* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2003), 48.

51 – *Ibid.*, 49.

52 – *Ibid.*, 48.

the power of the wind, the ideas. That is the only thing that will bring us what we need above anything else: a new engagement with art.<sup>53</sup>

An important change to the usual discourse about engagement *in* art is discernible here, because Tilroe is speaking about a new engagement *with* art: a new engagement between art criticism (which supposedly represents 'society') and art. That she had no desire to wait for artists and other art critics to share this understanding is apparent from her work as an artist and curator for the Sonsbeek 2008 exhibition in Arnhem, entitled *Grandeur*: 'Grandeur is not a goal, it is a model for thought.'<sup>54</sup> Nor is she averse to looking back nostalgically at the revolutionary times of Ruyters and Pontzen while developing her ideas for the exhibition:

With the demise of the grand ideologies, the idea of a New World and a New Man has disappeared as well. A great void has appeared in our culture. The most recent image of humanity as noble dates back to the seventies.<sup>55</sup>

Nevertheless, she claims that her 'exhibition is not about social idealism, but about a fundamental human urge: the desire to become better and greater than we are. This desire is genetic and determines our hope for the

future.'<sup>56</sup> Tilroe's plan to revive this 'hope' consisted of a procession moving through the city of Arnhem, in which different guilds would carry artworks to Sonsbeek Park where they would be on display for several months:

[We have] visited the different parts of the city and talked with the people. We brought in people from all layers of Arnhem's society, so we could form 'guilds' made up of Rotary Club members, lawyers and architects, but also inhabitants of down-at-heel urban areas, homeless people and even a guild formed by both Muslims and Christians.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the value that Tilroe seems to attribute to context, she did not care much that she was fully imitating Francis Alÿs, a Belgian artist living in Mexico, who had organised a similar procession in 2002,<sup>58</sup> when artworks from the collection of were carried through the streets of New York to their new, temporary destination in Queens: 'I got the idea of a procession after I had seen photos of a procession in Japan.'<sup>59</sup> Also Tilroe's relation to the heritage of Institutional Critique is questionable at least. Even though as a critic, she aspires to a broader social consciousness and seems to want to engage artists in the process – 'nobody dares to relate art to social life and integrate it in the cultural debate'<sup>60</sup> – the edifying sovereign values of the arts remain

53 – *Ibid.*, 53.

54 – Lucette ter Borg, 'Grandeur is méér willen zijn,' *NRC Handelsblad*, June 14, 2008.

55 – Stefan Kuiper, 'De kunstwereld is incestueus,' *De Groene Amsterdammer*, July 11, 2008.

56 – *Ibid.*

57 – *Ibid.*

58 – *The Modern Procession* (2002).

59 – Ingrid Commandeur, 'Sonsbeek 2008,' *Metropolis M* 6 (2007/2008), 20.

untouched. They just need to be communicated to the People through processions in their neighbourhoods:

Acuity, invention, breadth of possibilities, freedom, that is what you find in art. When it comes to that, I am a true believer.<sup>61</sup>

Art critic Hans den Hartog Jager does not share Tilroe's idealism – '[she] perpetrates gratuitous utopianism by trampling on the artists'<sup>62</sup> – and he explicitly rejects the development in visual arts of attempting to relate to socio-political issues:

Art hardly has anything left to do with the real world. And absolutely no influence on it. When it really matters, when the real world threatens to enter the museum halls, it pulls out. [...] Visual art has forgotten its constraints. Even better: it doesn't want to know its constraints, because everyone still believes that the sky is the limit. For the last few decades, artists, critics and people from the museum world have been projecting unlimited expectations on visual arts, directly due to this unshakeable belief in progress, invention and the limitlessness of ideas. [...] That type of art presents itself as fashionable

60 – *Ibid.*

61 – *Ibid.*

62 – Hans den Hartog Jager, 'Zet die roze bril eens af!' *NRC Handelsblad*, February 17, 2006.

and supposedly breaks with old formal conventions, but essentially it represents the ideology desired by politicians and administrators.<sup>63</sup>

He defines this development ironically as 'progressive art', holding artists like Lucy Orta, Martijn Engelbregt and Alicia Framis responsible:

Art is their excuse to have a rosy view on the world; they use Vinex<sup>64</sup> neighbourhoods and disadvantaged areas to achieve their own (artistic) goals – and once fulfilled, they move on. [...] Artists who voluntarily dive into such a world do not realise that they have become the lackeys of politics and policy.<sup>65</sup>

In response to this fake semi-avant-gardist progressive ideal, Den Hartog Jager claims:

At this moment [...] the visual arts would benefit from being judged by their clearest, most elementary merits: visual form. This may seem a step back, but it liberates artists from the flight forwards which has already held them hostage for decades, and it focuses on a different, more intriguing way of looking. Finally,

63 – *Ibid.* Den Hartog Jager mainly refers to the withdrawal of the Stedelijk Museum from an announced screening of the film *Submission* (2004) by film director Theo van Gogh based on a script by former People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali. This film showed surprising similarities with the oeuvre of the Iranian artist Shirin Neshat, who in her work discusses the role of Islam (in relation to women). Nonetheless, the security issues which had caused the screening of *Submission* to be cancelled, did not hold for Neshat's work. Den Hartog Jager interprets this as the incompetence of art to really break free from

artists would not be (partially) judged on the ideological or philosophical meaning of their work, but would again be considered people capable of accomplishing exceptional things, building their own worlds with paint and linen, metal and polyurethane foam, wood and photography – as if that isn't enough.<sup>66</sup>

Just like Tilroe, Den Hartog Jager had no intention of waiting until artists and related cultural representatives conformed to his point of view. Unlike Tilroe though, his answer happened to be formulated in a way that was very fashionable at that time: a canon published in book form, entitled *Dit is Nederland – In tachtig meesterwerken* (This is the Netherlands – In Eighty Masterpieces) in which he discusses his selection of the eighty most important paintings from the fifteenth century to the twenty-first century.<sup>67</sup> He critically reproaches the 'fashionable' artists for largely lacking a capacity for critical reflection because of their incompetence in realistically assessing the social impact of their work, but, at the same time, he lazily passes over the meaning of the canon. His artistic canon is a concept related to the discussion about the historical canon that was intended to form the basis of the 'House of History', a national centre offering a place for what are supposedly the most important events in our national history. Even though Den Hartog Jager's canon cannot

be placed on the same level as the shaky concept of the 'House of History', the tendentious character of his *Dit is Nederland* (it is hard to avoid seeing this in analogy with Rita Verdonk's political party Trots op Nederland<sup>68</sup>) comes as a direct response to that desperate, current issue of redefining our nation's fundamental and core values. In this case, he organises them through painting, which provides it – as a medium for creating 'exceptional things' – its continued right to exist. Add to this his refusal to discuss the complicated task of historiography (and the falsification of history) as the core issue of his canon (which should in fact be the core issue of *any* canon written today) he shows himself to be, just like Tilroe, extremely selective and inconsistent in the way he develops his own critique.<sup>69</sup> That is, inconsistent if we are to link *methods* to this critique. But this is different to his critique of 'progressive art', to which I partially subscribe, but his answer is intolerably conservative. Den Hartog Jager suggests that a large majority of contemporary artists has turned to mere bureaucratic interventions, while this is in fact an absolute minority. The 'exceptional' artists still addressing the central issue of the 'visual form' in fact still make up the majority. That should have been a comfort to him, although I would gladly strip it from his form-hungry nerves: the myth of the visual form, as an end in itself, with its own practice, is a completely illusory concept. Artists can and should *always* be judged on the ideological tension of their work. This is the essence

the 'insiders' network' and to confront the 'real world'.

64 – Mass produced suburban neighbourhoods built after 1995 [Trans.]

65 – *Ibid.*

66 – *Ibid.*

67 – Hans den Hartog Jager, *Dit is Nederland – In tachtig meesterwerken* (Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak/Van Gennep, 2009).

68 – From 2003 to 2007, politician Rita Verdonk was Minister of Immigration and Integration and Minister of Integration, Youth Protection, Prevention and Rehabilitation during the second and third governments of PM Balkenende. On 15 October 2007, she cancelled her VVD membership and founded her own political 'movement', Trots op Nederland (TON, Dutch Pride). TON aims to protect the values of Dutch culture and advocates an extreme form of direct democracy.

69 – A striking example of the development of new canons in art publications is the Taschen series *Art Now*. Not only because of

of Institutional Critique: our thoughts and actions are always formed and motivated by politics and ideology, without exception. True, this influence may be explained in different ways, and this is an essential task for both the artist and the art critic. However, Den Hartog Jager's attempted escape to visual form, the pureness of the *métier*, proposed no less at the opening of an *art fair*,<sup>70</sup> of all places – how ideologically charged could such a celebration of *Capital* get! – amounts to nothing less than a conscious flight into ignorance. Ignorance with the bonus of offering the possibility of transforming his authoritarian canonising urges into a booklet of eighty so-called masterpieces. In other words, his critique has almost nothing to do with the real world – the same real world he cares so much about.

The above statements of art critics and theorists, which I have interpreted mainly in the light of Institutional Critique, display two central conflicts, which make their profession today a messy business:

[1] The conscious or unconscious failure to make the consequences drawn from Institutional Critique have repercussions on the conditions that determine the *métier* of art criticism. Institutional Critique not only investigates the influence of the art institution on how an artwork is defined and interpreted, but also researches the different factors that shape the art institution itself, including art criticism. While critics constantly – and justifiably – place high

demands on the artwork in terms of how it accounts for its socio-political embedding, they appear unable to apply the same criteria to their own practice.

These critics all prove themselves to be ineffective at giving the backlash of their own critique any true shape when they attempt to derive methods from it. Graw offers an ironic apology to the reader when she 'accidentally' formulates new artistic canons herself. Ruyters confesses that he continues to go to 'wrong' exhibitions and even review them. Pontzen is stricken by a sudden nostalgia about a lost ethics of freedom which he simultaneously criticises. Tilroe's pleas for an (art-)historical consciousness are quickly forgotten the moment she organises a happening. Den Hartog Jager rails against 'fashionable art' and exchanges it for the populism of the historical canon. Their attempts to fall back on a pseudo-literary lyricism, as if they were not critics at all, but lyric poets (see for example Pontzen's 'vistas' and Tilroe's 'ripples') who occasionally take an artwork as a source of inspiration, barely mask the lack of insight they can give about their own role in the power structures that they love to resist and criticise. They all claim urgency – a common word in Pontzen and Tilroe's prolific writings – but this same urgency is absent in their own work and the formulation of their own ideas, except of course in calls for 'new symbols',<sup>71</sup> 'new engagement' or 'grandeur'. They just quickly and lazily fall back on the role that criticism supposedly has, on the rationale that 'critics make art'.<sup>72</sup>

the paradox inherent in the concept of 'now' and the artworks that connected to 'now', but also owing to the method of selecting the artworks to be included in the publication. The most important contemporary artists are not determined through the relevance attached to them by 'experts' like Den Hartog Jager, but through the market value of their work. The *Art Now* series is systematically supplemented by a section 'Practical Guide', provided by Artprice.com, listing the current auction prices of the works included in the publication.

70 – The Den Hartog Jager citations were taken from what was

originally his inaugural lecture at the annual Art Rotterdam art fair on 16 February 2006.

71 – Rutgen Wolfson and Anna Tilroe, *Nieuwe symbolen voor Nederland* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2006).

72 – Janneke Wesseling, 'Critici maken de kunst,' *NRC Handelsblad*, May 16, 2008.

That the opposite may be true – especially from the perspective of Institutional Critique – has clearly never dawned on them.

[2] The conscious or unconscious failure to render the influence of politics on the art institution and on the métier of art criticism consistently visible. The role of the public funding system in the Dutch art world and the many debates surrounding it particularly complicates art criticism's ability to convincingly resist the reappearance of the ethics of freedom in its many guises. Against their better judgement, art critics still attempt to do so, and in many ways, they attack their discipline's beloved scrutiniser, without actually wanting to lose it, because critics are unable or unwilling to shape their own utopian vistas. This typifies a level of criticism that is apparently too comfortable in its own position to place itself on the same level as artists with regard to the structures that determine its right to exist in the first place: politics. The battle against the ethics of freedom is nothing more than a diversion created to avoid facing its deep-rooted alliance with politics, an alliance that I think should be the prominent focal point of both art and art criticism.

The question remains whether Institutional Critique as a form of research in the arts actually places a fundamental demand on artists, the art institution and its audience, in the creation of radically different conditions for the production and functioning of the visual arts. The 'internal' issues of Institutional Critique have already been discussed: in the case of the first wave, Haacke's untenable separation between *good cop* (artist) and *bad cop* (art institution). This institutional separation is nullified in the second wave of Institutional Critique, by, among others, Andrea Fraser, who neutralises this separation and radically puts herself at the disposition of the institution. This

leaves the second element of what we call Institutional Critique, the 'critical' itself, unaddressed. In her work, Fraser emphasises her intrinsic connection to the art institution and parodies its mannerisms. However, this does not lead to radical shifts within the art institution (Fraser mainly seems to play the role of a brilliant stand-up comedian); at most it leads to a (crucial) reassessment of the relation between artist-museum/exhibition space and audience. The remaining question is what the significance of a potential third wave of Institutional Critique could be for the application of this internal critique to a larger socio-political constellation.<sup>73</sup> In this way, a third wave would concern the formulation of actual critical perspectives on *action*.

73 – See also Mihnea Mircan, 'Power?... To Which People?! - Notes after a conversation with Jonas Staal,' in *Power?... To Which People?!* (Heijningen: Jap Sam Books, 2010).

To discuss the meaning of a third wave of Institutional Critique, I think it is necessary to briefly discuss a number of relevant developments in Dutch cultural policy. These developments give insight into the relation of the art institution to politics, as well as the possibilities of reconsidering this relationship.

The key points of the current cultural policy originated under the administration of former PvdA (Labour Party) State Secretary for Culture and Media, Rick van der Ploeg, a member of former Prime Minister Wim Kok's second government (1998-2002). Van der Ploeg devised the notorious concept of 'cultural entrepreneurship' when trying to 'professionalise' artishood, and thereby place artists on the same level as 'regular' entrepreneurs, at least in the eyes of the government. He threatened to cut state funding to institutions drawing low levels of youth and immigrant participation. Under the current administration of PvdA Minister of Education, Culture and Science Ronald Plasterk, the concept of cultural entrepreneurship has lost much of its edge. It has been largely replaced by the more universal concept of 'excellence'. Nevertheless, concepts such as 'participation' and especially 'diversity', remain important points in Plasterk's memorandum *Kunst van leven* (Art For Life's Sake):

As in science, the aim in the culture sector is to promote excellence, support outstanding performance, and encourage innovation. [...] [I]t is important for as many people as possible to participate. One important challenge in this respect is for artistic and cultural programmes to reflect the ever-growing diversity of the public. [...] But if we are to really foster excellence, innovation and public

participation in the arts and culture, our basic premise will need to be: 'more money for fewer projects'.<sup>74</sup>

The tone of this piece is general, and in the vast sea of uninspiring memorandums on culture, there would have been little reason to quote from this specific one if it were not for the fact that this text formed the basis for an exciting co-operation between the Mondriaan Foundation – the institution actually implementing Plasterk's policy – and particularly, the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, led by the English Director Charles Esche. Gitta Luiten, Director of the Mondriaan Foundation, without taking Plasterk's principles for granted, translated them – especially those concerning her beloved theme of 'cultural diversity', a concept introduced by State Secretary for Culture and Media in Prime Minister Balkenende's second government (2003-2006), Medy van der Laan – into an influential policy, which was not received well. The so-called mini-council, a collaboration between the seven largest museums in the Netherlands (including Sjarel Ex's Museum Boijmans van Beuningen and Van Krimpen's Gemeentemuseum) openly vented its anger, especially about the *Cultural Diversity Stimulus Prize*, half a million Euro intended for an art institution that '[successfully] further developed and realised the dissemination of the relatively recent focus point of cultural diversity'.<sup>75</sup>

74 – Ronald Plasterk, *Art For Life's Sake: Dutch Cultural Policy in Outline*. Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. [http://www.minocw.nl/documenten/81931\\_art\\_of\\_life.pdf](http://www.minocw.nl/documenten/81931_art_of_life.pdf) (accessed January 25, 2009).

75 – 'Van Abbemuseum wint Stimuleringsprijs Culturele Diversiteit,' press release by the Mondriaan Foundation, May 17, 2006.

The prize was awarded to the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. Gijs van Tuyl, director of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, and chairman of the mini-council considered this damaging to the council's reputation as the 'premier league of Dutch museums'<sup>76</sup>:

Colour doesn't make any difference, we're concerned with art, not social issues. [...] That popular prize is a scam. [...] We're always doing everything we can to hold on to our audience and expand it. The Mondriaan Foundation, against better judgement, is presenting a pretty useless prize as funding for cultural diversity. They may as well throw their money out the window.<sup>77</sup>

If Van Tuyl considers 'social issues' irrelevant in his conception of the institution and its socio-political embedding, then clearly any notion of Institutional Critique has escaped him. His anger represents a long delayed transition period, one in which either the arts are made fully independent from the state, or the state places demands on the institutions' policies; in this case, by extension of the issues concerning the so-called multicultural project.

Although Charles Esche belonged to the mini-council, he did not side in the protest against the combination of Plasterk and Luiten. However, that does

76 – Harmen Bockma, 'Musea fel over Mondriaan Stichting,' *de Volkskrant*, March 27, 2008.

77 – *Ibid*.

not mean that he made no demands of his own to the government in terms of attending to the 'diversity' of society.<sup>78</sup> He claims that 'museums have become too much of a corporation, funded by private means. [...] Corporations demand a return on investment, which creates obligations.'<sup>79</sup> Though vaguely formulated (it was after all the government which made demands to the Van Abbemuseum and did in fact get a return on its investment, i.e. it highlighted 'diversity' as a socially relevant issue in our society), Esche *does* take a side: art is the face of society, society is structured and maintained by the state. Therefore the state should take care of art.

I agree with the viewpoint of the Mondriaan Foundation. I think that museums have an important task when it comes to coexistence of different cultures. [...] Remarks such as those made by Wim van Krimpen of the Gemeentemuseum in Den Haag. [...] about his reluctance to hold multicultural exhibitions that nobody would visit anyway, about his lack of interest in art from Shanghai or Madagascar, these are unacceptable. The Mondriaan Foundation is right to want to change that way of thinking. Institutions should be challenged to have a critical look at themselves.<sup>80</sup>

With this statement, Esche legitimates the immediate involvement of the Mondriaan Foundation as an instrument of the state, even though he claims that he will

'certainly will keep a critical eye on the foundation'.<sup>81</sup>

In co-operation with Irish curator Annie Fletcher, Esche used the prize money to put on *Be[com]ing Dutch*, which consisted of a lecture series, an exhibition and a series of (temporary) public artworks in Eindhoven between September 2006 and November 2008. Esche's engagement with the way the Mondriaan Foundation introduced a political agenda into the art world culminates in this project. The catalogue texts can be read as a full elaboration of the points that Plasterk's memorandum *Art For Life's Sake* only introduced:

In our opinion [...] 'Dutchness' is neither univocal nor unchanging. Our diversity contributes to the feeling of identity that we share by living together. This process finds itself in a continuing state of change and development.<sup>82</sup>

While the project title might suggest that 'becoming Dutch', despite all the 'diversity' in society, is still the target, the authors (Esche, Fletcher and Ivet Maturano) add a precautionary footnote. The footnote is essential for coming to terms with this rhetoric of diversity that renders meaningless any form of duty or loyalty to adopt a certain position, by constantly placing it in a spectrum of unbridled tolerance and an interest in the many truths that would exist in this world.

78 – Diversity is a really unbearable and untenable concept that is obviously directed at the 'immigrant' citizen who just doesn't feel like queueing up for the exhibitions, but are referred to as such out of a fake (political) correctness.

79 – Rutger Pontzen, 'Musea zijn te zeer bedrijven geworden, gerund met privé-geld,' *de Volkskrant*, January 21, 2006.

80 – Maartje Somers, 'Rel rond Mondriaan generatieconflict,' *NRC Next*, November 11, 2006.

81 – *Ibid.*

82 – Charles Esche, Annie Fletcher and Ivet R. Maturano, *Be[com]ing Dutch – Ons woordenboek* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2006), 8.

There are many different ways of being, and as many ways to express this. This project aims to work with the idea of diversity and to ask – if we are all potentially very different – how we can build a society and enter into meaningful and mutually invigorating relationships.<sup>83</sup>

Esche's colleague Maria Hlavajova, the artistic director of exhibition space BAK in Utrecht is also one of his most frequent partners in collaborations. Despite a less obvious relationship to the Mondriaan Foundation, she is possibly even more explicit about the relationship between politics and the art institution. Hlavajova refers to the literary theorist Edward Said in her statement that 'if those that have knowledge [i.e. the artists] lose contact with those who have power, there is problem'.<sup>84</sup> The separation between art institution and politics, and the role of the artist as 'outsider' is wasted on her:

Political art is not the registration of political events. The artist should position himself. He should adopt an attitude in which he does not deny being a part of the world. As an artist, you have a choice: flee the world, or confront it. If you close yourself off, it will affect you eventually, I am convinced of that.<sup>85</sup>

She characterises the critical implications of such a position as follows:

Whenever art 'represents', it does not do so in an attempt to be moralistic, to persist in clichés or to offer clear solutions. The discussion about 'political' or 'engaged' art reached a deadlock on that very point [...]. We could better follow the proposal of political thinker and theorist Chantal Mouffe, and describe these works as 'critical artistic practices' which are not about 'criticism' but about being 'critical', about a critical attitude towards the consensus about who we are and our place in the public sphere. What I mean by this comes close to what the British art theorist Irit Rogoff proposes with 'criticality', namely, appropriating a problem and relating it to yourself instead of analysing it from a distance, and thus working on the unstable ground of actual *embeddedness*, of 'playing a role'.<sup>86</sup>

She locates the ideal outcome of this approach in the work of the Dutch visual artist Aernout Mik, in whose work the role of the subject can both relate to the audience and to the displaced people that populate his work. Using largely slow-motion images, his video

83 – *Ibid.*, 14.

84 – Wieteke van Zeil, 'Een betere wereld dromen,' *de Volkskrant*, December 7, 2006.

85 – *Ibid.*

86 – Maria Hlavajova, 'Na de noodtoestand – Enkele opmerkingen over Citizens and Subjects naar aanleiding van het werk van Aernout Mik,' *Open 14* (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers/SKOR, 2008), 131.

work anticipates the seemingly clear power relations connected to media images, which he stages and in which the usual position of power vis-à-vis the citizen-subject is blurred on purpose. Hlavajova sees her thinking about the concept of 'embeddedness' reflected in Mik's video works *Training Ground* (2007), *Convergencies* (2007) and *Mock-Up* (2007), which deal with, among other issues, the subject's role in environments like detention centres:

By acknowledging that we participate in the realisation of this horrible image of the world [i.e. the existence of such detention centres] we might feel the desire to change our mentality, and perhaps dare to believe again that a fundamental revolution is possible and that art could play a role in it. Failing that, we could at least concur with a dialectic between scepticism and idealism.<sup>87</sup>

Hlavajova's statements and writings are a collection of contradictions, in which the fantasy of another world – a fantasy that can never be a 'clear solution', because solutions are apparently too moralistic – is corrupted by the need to ascribe a certain level of relevance to the artworks facilitated by the institution she represents. This expression of the desire for a different 'mentality' is apparently predicated on a

viewing of Mik's video works. Exactly whose mentality she is talking about remains unclear, but Hlavajova's question – 'Why would the average citizen be afraid of a Muslim, or an immigrant?'<sup>88</sup> – seems to reveal some of her motives: she desires a tolerant 'mentality' in a culturally diverse society. Naturally, she knows that this is a 'mentality' that one of Mik's video works is not going to bring about, but this does not seem to curb the sense of duty she feels to legitimate herself. So finally she puts forwards an alternative proposal – in fact the only proposal she herself takes seriously – to concur with Mik's 'dialectic of scepticism and idealism'. In other words, she proposes an intellectual exercise, which in itself we should take seriously, were it not contaminated by Hlavajova's half-heartedly formulated desire for an art which could bring about better social relationships (so the 'common' citizen does not have to fear Muslims). But if we take Mik to be representative of BAK's mission, it becomes more or less impossible to project these ideas on to his extremely gripping, but socially ineffective work. And projecting is the right word for this, because the problem here has to do with the fact that Hlavajova *herself* sees absolutely no reason for the 'average citizen' to be afraid of Muslims. Convinced that this fear is totally unfounded, she interprets Mik's work as a representative intellectual counterpart of what she considers basic feelings of fear and alienation. Thus an elementary part of a desired emancipatory process is turned around, because the

87 – *Ibid.*

88 – Wieteke van Zeil, 'Een betere wereld dromen'.

emancipator (Hlavajova) assumes an already enlightened point of view, instead of relying on the concrete effect of the instrument she proposes (Mik) on the 'average citizen'.

But I do not involve Esche and Hlavajova here because of their contradictions. I do so because they are two of the few participants in the Dutch art institution trying to break down the taboo surrounding the potential reconciliation of the art institution and politics.<sup>89</sup> A direct, active alliance, a liberal deployment even, of art with respect to the political apparatus: from Plasterk to the Mondriaan Foundation and beyond. Despite their ideologically vague interpretation, they have given art the breathing space necessary to make it a part of the powers that be, to allow it to be deployed by politics, and, like a perfect couple, the other way round too. The added value of this co-operation naturally lies in the continuation of the research of Institutional Critique. It is *precisely* by the acknowledgement of the direct mutual influence and a common agenda that the concept of criticism reacquires true significance. It is *precisely* through this acknowledgement that it makes a *claim* to the power which shapes it and which shapes the art institution *in return*. This creates the space for real *critical action*. I will elaborate this point more later.

In 2005, PvdA party leader Wouter Bos stated that 'in the Netherlands, politics and culture have become

entwined in a clumsy, half-hearted embrace',<sup>90</sup> and subsequently called for 'an active cultural politics in which politicians are not afraid of debate'.<sup>91</sup> These quotes are from the preface to the pamphlet *De kracht van kunst* (The Power of Art), written by PvdA MPs John Leerdam, Jet Bussemaker and Hester Tammes. Even though Bos' call for debate resonates throughout the text, and it defines the space left by politics for art to contemplate new alliances, the reader is left disappointed. The principles that it claims would make this debate possible are described in statements such as:

Art and culture make you think, shake up the obvious, put things into perspective and spread confusion. They provide creativity in our knowledge economy. [...] Art and culture build bridges (bridging). In our diversified society, it is important that people come together and get to know each other. Art provides a platform to do so. [...] Enjoying art and culture can be a source of pride, provide the feeling of belonging to something, and an awareness of identity (bonding).<sup>92</sup>

To see highly educated people with political responsibility write like this is enough to drive you to despair. It is nearly impossible to discuss with any precision the contradictions and distasteful presuppositions made

89 – That is not even the whole story, because their thinking directly affects the exhibition practice itself. A pertinent example is the participation of BAK and the Van Abbemuseum in the Brussels Biennial (October 19, 2008 - January 4, 2009) which focused on the meaning of the modernist project. Instead of inviting artists, the curator of this exhibition, Barbara Vanderlinden, invited art institutions to make a presentation. Whereas many of the institutions involved took on the role of curator, BAK and the Van Abbemuseum chose to collaborate as 'artists' themselves. In the exhibition entitled *Once is Nothing*, they showed the replicated exhibition

environment of the presentation *Individual Systems* by curator Igor Zabel as shown during the 50th Venice Biennale, which dealt with a thematics comparable to Vanderlinden's.

90 – Roland de Beer and Joost Ramaer, 'Snijden in eigen vlees,' *de Volkskrant*, March 15, 2007.

91 – Ibid.

92 – John Leerdam, Jet Bussemaker and Hester Tammes, 'Kunst maakt het leven mooier en kan mensen bij elkaar brengen,' *de Volkskrant*, November 8, 2005.

about art in this very short citation alone. But it teaches us one of the crucial tasks of art: if it wants to take on and establish a fruitful relationship with the political system, the art institution will have to re-educate politics. From the literary qualities of politicians to one of the essential tasks of art, namely, formulating *demands* to the audience and indicating fundamental, sometimes irreconcilable *differences* between individuals. Politicians have to be involved not only as observers in the arts, but as *co-creators*. Only in this way, can a third wave of Institutional Critique truly take shape.

IV.

POLITICS

The relationship between the visual arts and the Dutch state may be called fairly unique, partly owing to the nearly fetishistic manner in which the contradictions of the art policies are publicly debated. The results are sometimes pathetic, but because of the contributions of Plasterk-Luiten and Esche-Hlavajova, we are witnessing the emergence of an interesting interplay of forces.

A *crossroads*, at which politics has to choose between [1] ostensibly abandoning art and treating artists like independent entrepreneurs, equal to any other,<sup>93</sup> and [2] publicly acknowledging the involvement and influence that the state has *always* had – even in periods of the unequivocal celebration of the ethics of artistic freedom – and the *interest* it has in art.<sup>94</sup>

The choice to recognise the way art and politics are intertwined seems to prevail, partly thanks to representatives like Esche. However, Esche does not seem to be inclined to meet two of the most important demands of cultural politics since Van der Ploeg. First, to mainly allow the importance of the arts to be determined by the economy so as to cut out the investments in art and culture as much as possible, and second, to address the issues concerning immigration and integration from this position of ‘independence’ and reduced funding. According to politics, the multiform, tolerant and thus curious art should play a more positive role in addressing the lack of diversity in society.

Politics has a fundamental choice to make which brings back painful memories. An *acknowledge-*

*ment* of a direct, *mutual* instrumentalisation should form the essence of a thorough revision of the meaning of Institutional Critique. That would mean facing the greatest taboo dominating the relationship between the art institution and politics: art as *propaganda* for the state. In that situation, the state takes on the role of a landlord not unlike the former role of the church, nobility and rich bourgeoisie.

Although Esche and Hlavajova, by emphatically harking back to the social and democratic entanglement of the art institution and the state in the 60s and 70s, try to maintain a substantial distance from this taboo by indulging in the positive and elevating ideal that art supposedly has for ‘average citizens’, it is inevitable that this discourse take place in this open wound.

This conclusion has far-reaching consequences for our thinking about the sovereignty of art and its position vis-à-vis the facilitating and tolerating state. Was it actually ever possible to speak of a sovereign art? An art independent of the systems it criticises or resists? Or has art as an instrument of the powers that be always remained the norm, an instrument in the hands of the state, the church, the nobility or rich bourgeoisie – despite very different manifestations of this intertwining? If this is the case, and I believe it is, why have we closed our eyes to this art practice? Why did we ever speak about an independent art, a critical and sovereign form of artisthood, when artists have always stood in direct relation to the powers that be?

93 – The concept of ‘cultural entrepreneurship’ and the consequences of the politics that have been created around it, is a subject that merits an essay of its own, especially in relation to the role of the ‘market’, which, according to many policy makers, has some sort of purifying and democratising role compared to the opaque or subjective – ‘elitist’ – system of public art funding. But in the art market, this so-called ‘elite’ plays an even bigger role, depending on the most strategic and wealthy position that one is able to occupy. In the United States, where the government subsidises the arts mainly through tax cuts for art consumers, the art market has become a

lucrative paradise for capital, because the many rules pertaining to the usual trading of goods seem to have little or no value on the art market. In that sense, the so-called ethics of freedom is not only valid for the artists, but also increasingly for the investors and traders in visual art.

94 – A rather unique event that needs to be mentioned here is the Boekman lecture given by the Amsterdam alderman Carolien Gehrels on 5 June 2009. In this lecture, she attempted to settle a score with the so-called ‘Thorbecke dogma’, which claims that politicians should not interfere with the content of art: ‘It is my

This question, of what exactly criticism is or could be, touches on the foundation on which Institutional Critique has been built. Before answering this question in detail, it is necessary to consider the ideological arguments of present and past for which art has been used, especially in the Netherlands (the first regulation for artists, the Visual Arts Regulation (BKR), dates from 1956). Why did the government deploy and regulate art under the pretext of liberation? What purpose, in other words, does independent, sovereign art have as a means for propaganda – as I have discussed it here – in the second half of the twentieth century?

Contemporary art has done everything within its power to prevent the relationship between art and political power as it was in the past from reoccurring in the present. Under no circumstance should it seem as if our artists are the propagandists of our political system. The impression must not be given that politics determine the artistic agenda: in fact politics are expected to clear the way of ideological obstacles, so that art can pursue the ethics of freedom unhampered.

Anyone who occasionally reads art reviews or opens the catalogue of an exhibition or an artist, will be somewhat familiar with the unwritten rules of determining the quality of a work. I am talking mainly about art with any social orientation whatever: in which subjects of a socio-political nature form the actual *material*. The unwritten rules dictate that art

opinion that the debate on art should return to the political arena. An administrator, alderman or minister should be able to govern strongly and broadly in this special area as well. [...] Art does not belong only to artists, art belongs to the whole city – to the whole nation. And therefore – also – to politics. [...] The government has a role in the arts, because art is about values. Values of such great importance to our society that the government may not and cannot withdraw: freedom, equality, multiformity and quality.

is supposed to reflect society, it is supposed to raise questions about the world around us, it is supposed to be ambiguous and layered, it is supposed to depict the world as being diverse, it is supposed to be a place where we speak not of a single truth, but of a plurality of truths and realities. Art is expected to be open and tolerant, to do its best to resist dogmatism and ideological deployment, to avoid the mistakes of the past – to avoid the ‘lumping together’ of certain communities or minorities.

These unwritten rules almost completely coincide with the principles maintained by politics to define the importance of the arts. However, I do not believe that the so-called involvement of politics is created by the conviction that ‘art can surprise, be evocative and inspire’<sup>95</sup> (GroenLinks) and ‘build bridges, encourage pride and hope’<sup>96</sup> (PvdA). Nor do I attach much value to the fake autonomy that some politicians continuously ascribe to art, claiming that ‘the significance of culture is best supported by leaving it alone’<sup>97</sup> (VVD) or ‘the government should not interfere with the content of art and culture’<sup>98</sup> (D66). I believe that these definitions *on the contrary* show the extent to which visual art is related to the Dutch state as a means of propaganda. Is it not the case that the visual arts are the desired embodied image of democratic ideology – *democratism*<sup>99</sup> – when it is self-critical, questioning, tolerant, continuously developing, and displays a deep interest in *others*? Do we not welcome politicians to

95 – GroenLinks (GreenLeft) website: [www.groenlinks.nl](http://www.groenlinks.nl).

96 – PvdA (Labour Party) website: [www.pvda.nl](http://www.pvda.nl).

97 – VVD (People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy) website: [www.vvd.nl](http://www.vvd.nl).

98 – D66 (Democrats 66) website: [www.d66.nl](http://www.d66.nl).

99 – In Tokyo, writer Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei informed me about the fact that the Japanese word for ‘democracy’ (*minshushugi*) can better be translated as ‘democratism’, as an ideological ‘ism’ (*shugi*) like capitalism or Marxism.

articulate the way in which they want art to be free and independent, when the visual arts properly declare this freedom and independence its main quality? Is it not this freedom and independence that make up the central values of democratism, and are we as artists not its greatest advocates, *whatever we do*?

Who better than the artist to be the face of democratism: what would become of all its freedoms and edifying values if there were no arts to propagate them? Arts which have consistently provided the *burden of proof*? Is it not the case that this is the actual *task* that the state has given to artists by means of all kinds of foundations, tax cuts and art schools: to *show* the rest of the world the success of this free society and its citizens?

And with this we arrive at the essence of the role occupied by the state as patron to the art institution. The logical counter-argument against the definition of art as a means of propaganda is of course Plasterk's favourite concept: its *diversity*. The 'diverse' landscape of the Dutch social-democracy in the end is expressed in the structure of our political system: more than ten different parties in the upper and lower houses of parliament, and many more parties at the municipal level, a variety of subjects for debate, ranging from the health care system, the privatisation of government institutions, immigration and integration, to the role of the Netherlands in an international context. But from what consensus do they express all these 'diverse' subjects? Obviously, *democratism itself*. This *national standard* is never disputed by politicians. Obviously there is much 'debate' about the interpretation of democratism *in relation to* the subjects under discussion, but never in recent history has a party rejected democratism *as such*.<sup>100</sup> The *actual existence* of the artist – regardless of his activities – shows that he represents all the values claimed by the system of democratism.

The existence of the artist proves the capacity of politics to accept self-criticism, and the financing and facilitation of this criticism even suggests that politics deem this necessary within the standard of civilisation it represents. This standard of civilisation is of course the standard of democratism.

However, this consensus is not without its victims, as with any *ideology*. From our political support of the invasion in Iraq to our 'rebuilding missions' in Afghanistan, everything has been aimed to spread democratism and the 'freedom' connected to it – and we may ask ourselves *whose freedom* we are talking about. Over the past few years many Western 'democratic' governments showed repeatedly that democratism is not the end of history, and no solution has been offered for conflicts that might well be solved in the 'diverse' nature of its system. Instead, it has shown that, as ideology, it has functioned as an excellent *weapon* against those who have not yet converted to democratism. And we, artists, just like Ruyters who keeps on going to wrong exhibitions, have not drawn any conclusion whatsoever from this ideological alliance. The fallout in our work is always the result of a depleted ethics of freedom, as offhandedly defended by Pontzen. Our government is at war and pays for our presence here (and sometimes even for our *embedded* presence with soldiers somewhere else<sup>101</sup>), because this presence itself is *proof*. Proof of our 'human mistakes', of our ability to face them (self-)critically, but

100 – We should probably return to the foundation of the Socialistische Partij (Socialist Party) in 1972, when the defence and implementation of Maoist thought (and therefore the abolition of parliamentary democracy as such) was still one of the main points in their political programme.

most importantly, proof of the values of democratism as the *ultimate* ideological project. As artists, we are the progressive, democratic home front legitimating the advance of soldiers somewhere else. This political consensus about democratism is therefore also the relentless consensus of the contemporary art institution. If politics can be accused of having soiled its hands, so can the art institution.

To return to why this status quo is silently accepted by artists, criticism and politics, we will have to open the *can of worms* that is the twentieth century. The century in which art resided more than ever in the proximity of power, and was even *equated* with power in the context of the Third Reich. Art historian Michel Peeters correctly states that this apotheosis between the art institution and politics

is usually kept quiet, often owing to misplaced shame or a lack of knowledge. [...] Fear of repeating the past [...] is understandable, but a weak argument. As if looking at these objects [of art from the Third Reich] would directly turn the observer into a Nazi sympathiser.<sup>102</sup>

Peeters creates space to look at artists like architect Albert Speer, cinematographer Leni Riefenstahl, painter Arno Breker and sculptor Josef Thorak, beyond

101 – Writer Arnon Grunberg and theatre group Orkater have both made visits to our troops in Afghanistan.

102 – Michel Peeters, *Beelden voor de massa - Kunst als wapen in het Derde Rijk*. (Antwerpen: Houtekiet, 2007), 8.

the pathos of the Third Reich. For what does the concept *entartet*<sup>103</sup> – degenerate – actually mean in Nazi rhetoric? It refers to art that has lost touch with its obligation to care about the moral well-being of the state, and therefore the People. Hitler advocated a monomaniac neo-classicist ideal, an ideal that, for my part, can remain in the catacombs of history. But is it not the case that this concept of degenerate art's *refusal to acknowledge* its intense entanglement with the socio-political dimensions of society, is precisely the problem that arises when developing the line of thought of Institutional Critique? Not the degeneration of a modernist search for a 'pure' form and style, which Hitler simply wanted to eliminate, but the degeneration of the fact that this search for form and style has always been closely intertwined with the ideological foundation of our society: democratism. Is this *disavowal* not the true *degeneracy* or *corruption* of the contemporary art institution?

As has been stated earlier, it is precisely art's sovereign quest – compared by Plasterk to scientific research – that propagates the values of democratism: democratism which wants independent art to serve as a figurehead for independent citizens. In a broader perspective, as the democratic face to undemocratic countries that have not yet embraced the enlightened values of freedom, tolerance, criticism and self-criticism. Our contemporary degenerate art is shaped by an art institution that fails to acknowledge

103 – On 9 July 1937, the exhibition *Entartete Kunst* opened in the Archaeological Institute in München. The exhibition was intended to show the 'cultural decay' of the era before the foundation of the Third Reich. 650 paintings were on display, including work by Max Beckmann, Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Edvard Munch, combined with photography made by people with a mental or physical handicap.

this propagandistic representation of democratic standards, and does not want to see them as the basis of its role in society.

Let us compare the call made by Director Ex of Museum Boijmans van Beuningen to the 'friends of the museum' to take part in the BankGiro Lottery next to that representative *par excellence* of Institutional Critique, Hans Haacke's own attempt to expose the underlying structures of this same museum by revealing the 'invisible' opportunistic motives in the collection thirteen years before Ex's letter. Should we then conclude that Ex has learnt nothing from Haacke? That Ex has squandered the legacy of the museum to a money-hungry organisation like the BankGiro Lottery? Or is Ex the true avant-gardist, not intending to maintain the illusion of an untouched museum and wishing to have a direct link to the flow of capital that requires all accounts be settled with the fake idealism of good cop Haacke, who 'exposes' ideological motives, but does not take into account that the museum is by definition a corrupted reflection of the co-ordinating power structures of state and capital? But most importantly, who fails to acknowledge that he himself is a part of this reflection.

Or might it be that both are wrong, and that both forms, Haacke's critique and Ex's radical lack of it, represent a spastic art that refuses to acknowledge its own political embedding and to ally itself with politics? This is a false dualism that prevents art from flourishing, from taking its rightful place, next to its father: next to, and equal to the powers that be.

V.

PROPAGANDA

In order to discuss the role of art as a means of propaganda within a European context, it is essential to briefly consider Hitler's art policy, both to clarify the meaning of art in relation to power, and to demonstrate the *difference* between two types of propaganda. The choice to discuss the role of art in Hitler's regime is not only based on the fact that his insight into art and his engagement with it was many times larger than Mussolini's or Stalin's. Naturally, this engagement was fuelled by his own, initially failed, artistic career (if we were to approach the Third Reich as his *Gesamtkunstwerk*, then he proved himself much more ambitious and effective). Another reason to investigate the epoch of the Third Reich originates in the fact that Hitler developed and made others develop policies that could be interpreted as exemplifying the meaning of Western propaganda: the complete merging of the arts and politics. Especially in the *Reichskulturkammer* (RKK, Reich Chamber of Culture), founded in 1933 by Joseph Goebbels, and which in the beginning also engaged in the destruction of the few remains of *entartete Kunst*, for example, by burning 3800 drawings by artists like Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, Paul Klee, Käthe Kollwitz and Emil Nolde. The RKK replaced the egocentrism which *entartete Kunst* had been accused of with the glory of a new state-endorsed art. Architect Winfried Wendland formulates this as follows:

Today, the artist has rediscovered the desire to participate in the life of the people. He wants to be a part of their battle, their pain and their troubles. He no longer wants to be free, but to serve an idea, a state, a church, a community.<sup>104</sup>

Two years after the foundation of the RKK, it had 100,000 members, including architects, painters,

sculptors, graphic designers, cinematographers, art publishers, actors and musicians. Among other institutions, the *Kraft durch Freude* (KDF, Strength through Joy) was established to keep these cultural producers busy by, for example, buying artworks for canteens and communal spaces. Workers were often allowed to choose work for their own work spaces from the collections.

However, the most important meaning of the arts in the Third Reich lies not in its far-reaching facilitation by the state, but the other way round: the far-reaching facilities art provided the state to manifest itself and to present itself to the people as ubiquitous. So what exactly, in Hitler's Germany, was *power*? Hitler's power manifested itself, before he could show himself as absolute Führer to the people, as extremely weak and still dependent on the support of volunteers and voters, sponsors and party members. We can only begin to speak of a form a visible power from the moment Hitler was able to intimidate his opponents and his own voters: the moment the rise of his regime came to seem inevitable, resulting in a paralysing effect on doubtful voters and opponents. Not to a small extent because of his army of thugs – the SA (*Sturmabteilung*), or 'Brownshirts' founded in 1921, which in the beginning was responsible for the security of Hitler's NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party) meetings – which crushed the socialists, communists and other forms of opposition. From this basis and supported by

104 – Michel Peeters, *Beelden voor de massa – Kunst als wapen in het Derde Rijk*, 86.

an economic crisis, Hitler managed finally to acquire absolute power.

The moment Hitler acquired absolute power, is the precise moment at which power as such becomes a problematic concept. As absolute ruler of Germany, he could no longer use his role of *underdog* or his SA thugs to intimidate the people in a nearly anarchistic, random way. Hitler himself was the one with final responsibility. The accusing finger, pointed at Jews and communists, was no longer enough: symbolic omnipotence cannot be channelled through the physical power of an army of thugs. That is why, at a very early stage, Hitler considered the arts to be his most important instrument for contextualising his newly acquired power: by using the Reichskulturkammer to *depict* this power. Power is not a field of forces that can be immediately recognised as such: it has to be facilitated, it has to manifest itself *somewhere else or through something else*. Without this persuasive platform it is homeless. In that sense, there is something parasitic about power, it needs a host to live on and to gain credibility.

To do so, Albert Speer's architecture and Leni Riefenstahl's films turned out to be the perfect vehicle. The fact alone that the immense, grotesque buildings of the eternal capital *Germania*<sup>105</sup> were built just for Hitler, would have been enough to allow his *Geist* to guard over his home country, even in his absence. Speer ensconced Hitler's power, which up

to that point had manifested itself in an uncontrolled way. Speer actually built a world *around Hitler*. From its centre, power would be able to emanate on every occasion, and express itself effectively and in a well-measured way. Speer had built a set for a continuous film: a film for eternity, in which at any time one would have to be prepared, slightly anxiously, to receive the father of the state, who might reveal himself suddenly from one of Speer's arterial roads as a spiritual or physical force.

Speer's cinematographic counterpart was Riefenstahl, who did not think from power itself, but actually took on the role of the audience. The audience who was suddenly visited by this power and lifted into the heavens as it was seized by the ancient Germanic spirit, the all-surpassing 'Triumph of the Will'.<sup>106</sup> Riefenstahl, who was never an official member of the NSDAP, was not able to facilitate power from its centre (Hitler), as Speer did. Her films mainly *reframe* power, render it comprehensible from the position of *observer*. She supplements the hysteria of people when it finds itself surrounded by Speer's carefully directed architecture of light with her cinematographic work. In the films that she produced during the days of the Third Reich, she accompanied the people to render the triumph of power – of which they could have captured only a fragment in *real time* – tacit in the cinema. Riefenstahl takes her time. From the Greek athletic bodies in *Olympia*<sup>107</sup> to the triptych of speeches and parades in *Triumph des Willens*, her films are characterised by a

105 – Speer's most important project, *Germania*, has never actually taken shape, except for a giant scale-model representing a complete full neo-baroque rearrangement of the inner city of Berlin, inspired by the architecture of the Roman and Napoleonic empires. Also famous are the stadiums, boulevards, galleries and halls designed from 1934 onwards in Nuremberg, where different mass gatherings were held and captured on film in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* (1935).

106 – Riefenstahl's most important films include *Triumph des Willens* (1935) and the two parts of *Olympia* (1938). This last film is a report on the Berlin Olympic Games of 1936. Riefenstahl used shots from the games to portray Germany as a strong and civilised nation, a nation founded on the heritage of the ancient Greeks.

107 – A fascinating contemporary equivalent to *Olympia*, is the film *Zidane – Un portrait du 21e siècle* (2006) by video artist Douglas Gordon and film director Philippe Parreno. In the film, they follow a football match between Real Madrid and Villarreal that took place on 23 April 2005, but keep their battalion of cameras solely fixed on the

continuous advancement. Propelled by megalomaniacal music, her cinematographic work shows a fragment of Hitler's eternal triumph. Eternal, for it is precisely this constrained timeframe of the continuous advancement of the film (in which the large majority of shots is pointed at or ends in a blue sky dotted with clouds) shows an eternal power, and becomes less vulnerable with every second, lifting itself out of the frame, beyond the image, in short, beyond the physical borders of the film itself. Regulated and stylistically pure, the banks of clouds follow one after another, everything springing from the earth, on the way to a thousand-year imperium. Speer's architecture becomes the perfect stage, it functions optimally in the constantly circulating flows of power which, owing to Riefenstahl's visual ubiquity in the end elude the audience's grasp.

VI.

POST-PROPAGANDA

French football celebrity Zinedine Zidane. The cinematography is reminiscent of the sort used in wildlife films in which predators are filmed while they are sleeping, until they attack their prey. Especially the absence of any dialogue (only Zidane's short cries have been left intact) gives the growing impression that we are not watching an individual, but a prototype of the human, only controlled by the group in which he moves (the football team). In contrast to Riefenstahl's film, this one shows 'everything' (i.e. the match from beginning to end), and the break between the first and second part of the match is filled with a summary of events (from an attack in Iraq and a protest, to the personal confessions of the directors) intended to place the football match in a 'broader' perspective,

I am convinced that any important artist is conscious of the financial structures facilitating his or her work, that he or she takes a critical stance towards these structures and that this critical stance leaves a trace in the work. [...] Among artists there is a fundamental lack of knowledge about the [art] funding system, originating from laziness, navel-gazing and lack of interest. [...] An artist who refuses, for whatever reason, to reflect on or criticise the hand that feeds him, is producing – just as in a dictatorship – state art.<sup>108</sup>

This statement by visual artist Willem de Rooij immediately appeals to the practice of Institutional Critique: a truly critical art practice has to communicate its awareness of the socio-political conditions that broadly define and legitimate the meaning of visual art (and also artisthood). However, De Rooij forgets to incorporate the most important conclusion into his argument. If De Rooij indeed distinguishes himself from other artists through his critical consciousness, this does not necessarily mean that he is not a state artist, but that he is a *different type* of state artist. Using public means for a critical practice does not break down the relation to the state, instead it just entails *different* conclusions for art production within this relationship. I consider this

108 – Willem de Rooij, 'Staatskunst,' in *Second Opinion*, eds. Gitta Luiten, Lex ter Braak, Taco de Neef and Steven van Teeseling (Rotterdam: NAi Uitgevers, 2007), 81-82.

to be extremely relevant. De Rooij is a *different* type of state artist, and therefore produces a type of state art that is *other* than that produced by artists lacking his critical consciousness. I will discuss what kind of 'other' in the two final sections of this essay.

My interpretation of De Rooij's statement allows for a continuation, the introduction of the third wave of Institutional Critique: a condition that I will discuss as *post-propaganda*. Post-propaganda takes Dutch post-war artistic and cultural production as its point of departure, which is by definition determined by the same ideological basis, namely, by the ideological implications of Western democratism as discussed in section IV.

The main difference between post-propaganda and propaganda lies in the possibilities of interpretation that post-propaganda offers to the artist concerning the way he allies himself with politics. This is the complete opposite of propaganda in the Third Reich. The propaganda artist does not have the opportunity to discuss the form and presentation of his activities, whereas an artist within the condition of post-propaganda does have this option. This has to do with the fact that post-propaganda is shaped by, and might be conscious of its application for, the representation of democratism. This is primarily the case because art simply cannot *withdraw* from its inherent alliance with this ideology. Inevitably the design of the Dutch art institution has been determined by the values attributed to it by politics, values that are directly connected with democratism. The task of the art institution lies first and foremost in the acknowledgement of this situation, and second, in the exploration of its post-propagandist role in this system. This is related to the essential question: is democratism as we know it and export it to 'undemocratic' countries, a tenable construction that is truly 'democratic' in the way it functions? If this is not the

case, how do we assume the responsibility to represent or shape it in another way?

*Negotiation* is of the essence of democratism. Even though we can clearly define the ideological contours of democratism – the ideal of direct representation, of distributed power primarily in the hands of the people and channelled through politics – its practice is fluid, and random at times. It is exactly this element that was lacking in the Western propaganda of the past. For artists working under a state of that kind, the choice has often been unequivocally simple – actually, as simple as the proponents of the ethics of artistic freedom would present it today: acceptance of being used by the system or fleeing (or at least trying to withdraw as much as possible) from this system. Contemporary democratism however does not allow for such a simple choice.

I closed section IV with a different interpretation of the term *entartet* – degenerate – and a different concept of power: power underlying the condition of post-propaganda. How does this democratic power differ from the obscene, hysterical, dictatorial power that Speer and Riefenstahl were prepared to facilitate and frame? Which sort of power is the art institution of today, which is organised in a way that can be compared in a bureaucratic sense to the Third Reich, associated with in our current polity? An example may be the former BKR, or the so-called art library, art for canteens and public places or art funding regulations. If it were the same power, I would not be able to speak about post-propaganda (and would still speak of propaganda). So what are the basic conditions on which the *other* power is founded? What is the *other* art that it desires so as to make this power visible? What is the position of the art when we draw the obvious conclusions from De Rooij's position?

The Netherlands is a country in which it is tempting to claim that we, artists, are operating in the luxury of a controlled society free of conflict. Our so-called *polder model*, which is defined by the ideal of consensus based on far-reaching democratic consultation, suggests a culture of consultation, in which the reasonable overcomes the radical. This is true to a certain extent, and in any case these are the formal aspects of the Dutch interpretation of democratism. However, this consensus is often, and incorrectly, considered to be opposed to a direct manifestation of power, as we know it from the visual manifestation of totalitarian regimes.

The model of democratism has often been described as the 'dictatorship of the majority'. Many examples from the recent past however show that this is not always the case. The voice of the majority has to bow to the voice of the minority, or is at least forced to acknowledge that within the consensus model, *each party* ultimately is a minority. When in Belgium, the radical right-wing party Vlaams Belang (formerly, Flemish Bloc) made a democratically supported rise in power, the other parties immediately chose to establish a so-called *cordon sanitaire*: they refused to enter into a coalition with Vlaams Belang, and have managed, up to this very day, to keep the party in the Opposition. The Dutch Freedom Party (PVV) led by politician Geert Wilders, which surprisingly entered parliament winning nine out of hundred-fifty seats, was also immediately confronted with a comparable attitude. Even though there seemed to be no question of actually entering the government, the other parties immediately declared that they were not prepared to co-operate with Wilders. Even during election night, to the other politicians' horror, he employed this infamous slogan: 'Power to the people!' The suggestion that this slogan has been perfected in

democratism is therefore incorrect. On the contrary, democratism aims to create a distinct profile for itself under the guise of ‘freedom’ and ‘freedom of expression’. By presenting these ‘freedoms’ – these ‘privileges’ – as such, it in fact hides behind the actual consensus about the *place of power*. I only have to think of José Saramago’s novel *Seeing* to imagine the ultimate consequence of an actual full use of the model of democratism.

Saramago’s novel describes a city, most likely somewhere in the Western world, in which democratic elections are being held. When, at the end of the day, seventy per cent of the population appears to have cast a blank vote, the municipal government decides to redo the elections. After that, when it turns out that eighty per cent of the population has cast a blank vote, political power starts an operation to track down and punish the civil *conspiracy* that is shamelessly thwarting their establishment. The confusion only grows when not a single citizen is prepared to explain their choice – in democratism, voting is a private affair – and the resistance movement does not seem to have any coherence. The people have simply used the margin the system provides to shut it down: the blank vote, presented by the state itself as a civil right. Consequently, the state does everything it can to restart the ‘regular’ democratic process and track down these saboteurs of the free Western world (even if they do not exist). The state newspaper attempts to address the citizens’ responsibilities – ‘Capital City Orphaned Overnight’ and ‘Blank Voters Blanked By Government’<sup>109</sup> – but the citizens systematically give the same explanation:

No, sir, I didn’t [cast a blank vote], but if I had I would be just as much within the law as if I had voted for one of the

parties listed or had made my vote void by drawing a caricature of the prime minister.<sup>110</sup>

Saramago – who was a candidate, though low on the party list, for the Communist Party of Portugal during the European elections of 1999 – proves to be the critic *par excellence* of government that presents itself as being based on all kinds of ‘civil rights’ and ‘freedoms’, but barely takes into account the idea that the essence of democratism also means that citizens can use it to abolish it.

A direct parallel to Saramago’s provocation may be found in several statements made by former Minister of Justice Piet Hein Donner during Prime Minister Balkenende’s second government. He stated that if two-thirds of the Dutch population were in favour of introducing Sharia law, then it should be possible.<sup>111</sup> His announcement regarding the possibility of introducing this Islamic law was met with staunch criticism. Ranging from GroenLinks to the SGP (Reformed Political Party), and from the PvdA (Labour Party) to the PVV (Freedom Party), MPs agreed that this type of law would be ‘undemocratic’ – ‘Many people, including countless Christians, are suffering every day under Islamic law, which often goes hand in hand with great injustice and violence’<sup>112</sup> – or at least agreed that Donner’s statements did not ‘contribute to the debate’.<sup>113</sup> If Donner’s statement does not contribute to

109 – José Saramago, *Seeing*, trans. Margaret Jull Costa. (New York: Harcourt Inc., 2006), 88.

110 – *Ibid.*, 46.

111 – Cf. ‘Donner handhaaft uitspraken over sharia,’ *de Volkskrant*, September 13, 2006.

112 – *Ibid.*, quote made by Bas van der Vlies (SGP).

113 – *Ibid.*, quote made by Naima Azough (GroenLinks).

the debate, then what does? For is it not the essence of democratism that it can be modified, that it is subservient – vulnerable – to the ‘dictatorship of the majority’, whether these are future fascists, paedophiles or radical Islamists?

The conclusion that can be drawn, analogous to Saramago, is simple: the concept of democratism is valid as long as it satisfies the wishes of those who are or want to be in power. The exhausted first article of the constitution – the anti-discrimination principle – is a typical example: indeed, there is still an *aspiration* to treat every individual equally. But when alarms are going off, when the terror level is skyrocketing, the ‘protection’ of the civilians takes precedence and their so-called rights are suspended for *their own good*. This may be, and a discussion can be held about it – not with me though, but it is possible – *freedom of speech*, right? – but under no circumstances may we, whenever that seems expedient in such a situation, fall back on the ethics of freedom of democratism. In that case, and that is exactly what Donner is – correctly – aiming for, we can only conclude that democratism at its best ought to function as some kind of inspiring model for our *actual* polity. In that case, the illusion that in democratism we daily experience the apotheosis of the slogan ‘Power to the people!’ ought to be shattered for good.

In 2004, the French government implemented an explicit ban on headscarves worn by teachers and students at primary and secondary schools, because the doctrine of enlightenment – one of the basic conditions of democratism – had taught people the separation of church and state (let’s say: between personal beliefs, convictions and the public sphere). Feminists and radical enlightenment thinkers all got in line to compliment the elderly president Chirac – who won the elections with a ‘Soviet-style

score of 82 per cent’.<sup>114</sup> Philosopher Alain Badiou puts them in their place:

We maintain the following, quite curious thing: that the law on the headscarf is a pure capitalist law. It prescribes that femininity be *exhibited*. In other words, that the circulation of the feminine body necessarily comply with the market paradigm. It forbids on this matter – and with adolescents, the sensitive plate of the whole universe – all *holding back*.<sup>115</sup>

Again – and this is flawlessly shown by Badiou’s critique: we *can* have a discussion about headscarves, but *not* when we seriously desire to maintain the basic principles of democratism, which in the mean time, have already mostly become suggestive.

The condition of post-propaganda is in itself schizophrenic: for what happens when art is subservient to a power *that refuses to acknowledge itself as such*? I have already illustrated the consequences of the art institution that refuses to acknowledge its political roots through an assembly of representatives of the untenable ethics of artistic freedom. However, what would happen if, aided by the spectrum offered by Institutional Critique, we were able to venture beyond it? What would be the consequences of a position vis-à-vis a power that, when we demand an

114 – Alain Badiou, ‘The Law on the Islamic Headscarf,’ in *Polemics* (London: Verso, 2006) 102.

115 – *Ibid.*, 103.

explanation from it, constantly points its finger at us, saying: *you* have the power, *you* are the people, representatives of the art institution, our avant-garde, our knights on high horses, our crusade against injustice, looking for 'new vistas' and a more 'just society'? 'What is your answer?' we can already hear the bureaucrats asking us. This makes it even harder, because answers, solutions, are all *so* moralistic. We, artists, we merely ask questions, we are merely showing politicians the error of their ways. We are not prepared for them to do the *same* to us.

The answer is as simple as it is complex. The art institution and its main representatives – the artists – will have to depict power again, and all the schizophrenic convulsions that go with it. We will have to present ourselves to it, educate it, corrupt it, teach it that we no longer accept that our leaders do not want to reveal themselves as such. It is time for them to account for their power and to address the question demanding an answer: what is power within a system that calls itself democratic, but lacks the consistency to explore and formulate its basic values as such? This begs an even more difficult question: *what kind of system do we actually live in?* We may only get an answer to that question once the art institution decides to represent this *inconsistent* power in a *consistent* way.

This does not mean that I am advocating an art that conjures up its mirrors from the days of yore: I am advocating an art that can be held accountable, an art that no longer desires to ignore its fundamental roots in politics out of despondent fear, but shakes off all the clichés that were forced on it – its critical capacities and interrogative qualities – and acquires a place beside power – including all the inevitable risks and the potential failure that comes with any risk; an art that punishes its father for his ineptitude at being a true

father, and leads this elderly man towards a better – because more consistent – *design* for society.

A recapitulation of themes discussed in the previous sections:

01

The values ascribed to art during the twentieth century reflect the values of the ideological structure of our society; our democratic ideology: democratism.

02

This fact obligates the art institution to readdress concepts such as state art and propaganda. The only possible angle from which to approach this is the Institutional Critique which, during the sixties and seventies, established the basis for investigating these issues.

03

Directed by the ideal of a distributed power, in which the People control politics, the relationship between power and art in democratism has undergone a fundamental turn when compared to dictatorial power. This makes a literal application of the concept of propaganda untenable. This is why I speak of the condition of post-propaganda, which is governed by different power relation, in part determined by the concept of negotiation.

04

Post-propaganda assumes – also partly on the basis of this principle of negotiation – the equality of art and politics, in which they share responsibility for designing democratism.

05

The conflict within this condition is formed by the refusal of both art and politics to acknowledge this condition as such. The art institution refuses to discuss its own pseudo-autonomy and to consider its function as an ideological instrument completely controlled by politics. Politics refuses to surrender its untenable, neutral position vis-à-vis the arts, and – notwithstanding far-reaching, direct involvement as regards financing and content – preserves the ideal of a ‘free’

and 'independent' art and therefore denies the direct responsibility and power it has as the actual commissioning client of the art institution.

This essay aims to develop this last point as the foundation for an essentially politicised art and an *artification* of politics: to force both parties to publicly re-appropriate the power over the design, perception and realisation of democratism. Inevitably, this approach will create opposition. I will immediately point out how those who oppose the ideas that I have formulated will respond.

First by *denial*. Within the art institution, it is an all too well established idea that the arts are a *métier* that can be of no possible interest to politics. This would entail that the current polity simply shows *no interest whatsoever* in the arts and ascribes no *political value* to it. In this line of thought, art is nothing more than an obstacle in the next four-year policy memorandum, an item at the bottom of the list, only to be financed when Western capital is not in crisis. In this line of argument, the representatives of the art institution are nothing more than gilded beggars who are allowed to build their castles in the air on the fringes of society, thanks to the hardworking population. Politics, they will say, will *never listen to the arts*.<sup>116</sup> And if politics listens, it will only be perfunctorily. Power and art are thus fully separated because the art institution has no authority in possible *situations for*

*negotiations*. Only politics can formulate conditions for art, not the other way round. Seen in this way, my concept of post-propaganda is immediately dismissed as a *utopia*. Only an *artist* would be able to formulate that line of thought, *precisely because he is a social outsider*. Following this reasoning, no one but me would be able to prove the *impossibility* of the co-operation between art and politics.

Those who represent this position fail to understand that politics *cannot exist without the art institution*. As I have already stated in the fourth section of this essay, power – even the so-called distributed power of the current Dutch consensus model – cannot possibly manifest itself without the art institution. In this case I mean the arts in the broadest sense of the word: literature, poetry, architecture, theatre, music, philosophy and the visual arts. What is our political arena other than a *theatre* without professional directors? What are policy memorandums other than *manifestos* without professional poets, writers, theorists and philosophers? What are political advertisements other than *cinema* without professional script writers, actors and directors? And in a broader sense: what do so-called 'liveability', 'freedom of speech' and 'criticism' mean without architects, writers and visual artists to *prove* the nature and relevance of these concepts for society? What kind of 'freedom' could politics represent if there were no one to *articulate* it, to *visualise* it, no one to deliver the necessary proof of its *actual* functioning? What is democratism other than a hollow and silted-up shell, a meaningless political toy that is employed unjustly, arrogantly and without vision for the sake of the unfounded feelings of superiority of politicians themselves, without *artists* to shape its appearance?

<sup>116</sup> – This criticism of my concept of post-propaganda was formulated by Bart Jan Spruyt, conservative thinker and Director of the conservative Edmund Burke Foundation during a debate entitled *Vox Populi: de populistische verbeelding* on 26 May 2009 in the Royal Dutch Academy of the Sciences. Spruyt literally said: 'They will never listen to you.'

Again, some will point at the utopian foundation on which this counter-argument is based: society would still exist without the arts, right? Our society would not immediately disintegrate without the participation of the art institution, right?

I have to give the critics their due on this point. Indeed we might as well – just to mention a striking excess – live like puppets in Joep van Lieshout’s *Slave City*.<sup>117</sup> *Physical survival* in this type of bureaucratic *pipe dream* is possible. But that would be all. It would entail a society lacking any sort of *existential* artistic and ideological satisfaction. And this position can count on my unequivocal resistance.

The *reconciliation* with politics will not be initiated by politics itself. The current relations already show this. To a large extent, the art institution has become a political obstacle. Therefore the art institution should primarily operate from its actual *indispensability in the persistence of* democratism as the dominant ideological structure in society. Art production’s starting point must be the political definition of the arts, *even if politics does not want it to be*. Each form of production from the art institution will have to force a further revelation of the force field formed by the arts in the *continuing existence* of democratism. The art institution does not insist on participating in politics, it just *confirms* that politics is always already the foundation of *any form of artistic exercise*. The conception of post-

propaganda thus forms the exact opposite of a utopia: it aims to take once more as its point of departure an intimate intertwining of power and art, just as it has always been at the basis of any form of artistic production and actually still is. This, however, demands that the art institution be ready to make this continuation of Institutional Critique – the pursuit of rendering the relation between political systems and artistic production transparent – its only possible policy. This does *not* mean that only an undifferentiated art practice will remain possible, on the contrary. This approach is *exactly* what makes truly *different* forms of art production possible in democratism as a potentially *radical* system. The state of *denial* in which we find ourselves today, the automatic continuation of the craving for an anti-ideological art, an art in which the ethics of freedom and the ‘visual form’ make up the only norm and aim, is the truly monomaniacal and mechanical basis of the current, fundamentally uncritical way that the art institution relates to democratism. It forms the basis of the art institution’s victimhood in relation to politics: a blind faith in the values that the current state of democratism has forced on the art institution and which suggests that, in its current form, actually has some socio-political importance.

One of the most important mottos of Joseph Beuys, the German artist and cofounder of the political party Die Grünen (Green Party), has probably been ‘Jeder

117 – *Slave City* (produced since 2006), former title *Call Centre*, is a project by the Dutch visual artist Joep van Lieshout. The work comprises a series of scale-models, drawings, sculptures and calculations, sketching out a camp that is solely focused on efficiency. According to the *Business Plan Call Centre* (2006) this planned camp measures 50 square kilometres, in which 200,000 individuals in the areas of IT, help-desk and telemarketing. *Slave City* is completely self-sustainable when it comes to food, energy and waste-disposal, for example, by generating energy from the excrement of the workers, and by recycling deceased workers. The total investment

necessary to build *Slave City* is 770 million Euro. However, Atelier van Lieshout has calculated that the yearly net profit would be 7.5 billion Euro per year.

Mensch ist ein Künstler' – every human being is an artist. This statement has been often interpreted in a relative way: if everyone was an artist, how could art be able to distinguish itself from any other discipline? However, I would claim that Beuys is not referring to an autonomous or individual form of artisthood; he means a vision on society in which the social organism itself forms the total artwork, in which all disciplines aimed at the creation and use of the public domain – politics, justice and arts – will have to be interpreted from the perspective of art. Because they all are (or could be) potentially creative, radical and confronting disciplines focusing on the most fundamental questions determining a human life: what is the individual in relation to the systems making it possible to speak about 'individual' or 'system' in the first place?

For Joseph Beuys, democratism was never a domain in which only politics could play a role. *His* democratism is an ideological structure that is inherently contradictory. The ideal of equality, the freedom of speech and the freedom of religion are constantly conflicting. Thus democratism in itself is by definition ambiguous, alienating and contradictory. It is precisely through consistently continuing this ambiguity, alienation and contradictions that a truly emancipatory democratism becomes possible. That is truly the difference which cannot possibly manifest itself in contemporary art, still claiming its own sovereignty and freedom. The illusory separation between the social on the one hand and the artistic on the other creates a false agenda, which is maintained by critics like Den Hartog Jager, employing 'visual form' and 'extraordinary' artistic qualities to suffocate a truly radical art. They are dangling a carrot in front of us, only to maintain a clear and simple idea of the arts: one which is merely reflecting and asking questions, refusing *to ask the real questions, namely,*

about the actual aim of all these reflections and questions, and who actually placed them in the position of questioner and why.

Making a commitment to Beuys also means to carry the responsibility of contributing to the manifestation of power. It means that art can no longer make a claim to a sovereignty excusing it from the responsibility that any other form of the exercise of power in any other domain of society needs to carry. It also means that art will take its place next to and equal to politics when it comes to the design of the systems in and through which we live. Art will carry the responsibility for politics and vice versa. Now we are reaching an even more fundamental question: *what is politics, or what could politics be?* If there were no other possible definition of politics than a purely *bureaucratic* one, there would have been no reason to use it. In that case, I would have never claimed to be a *political artist*.

To me, politics interprets the process in which we *represent our ideals*, and I refuse to accept the idea that this process is only reserved for a few. I consider the *whole of the social exchange* to be a potentially political manifestation. This social exchange takes place *publicly, in public space*, as a locus where we gather and shape our ideas and opinions. However, its public nature has been increasingly stripped of its political meaning and has fallen into the hands of a few who determine which form of social exchange is allowed and which is not. This means a decrease of *democratic* space: space in which conflict and confrontation can be made visible, and therefore establishes the basis for political thinking and political existence. To withdraw conflict from this space means to *withdraw the possibility of a political existence*.

This definition of politics is essential to my proposition to *represent* a common advancement of art and politics, because it no longer exclusively ascribes the meaning of politics to politicians, as if they were the only ones that the artist could address to express the social meaning of his activities. On the contrary, this argument claims that *artists are already representatives of the people*. In this essay, I have tried to sketch out the obstructions preventing this political consciousness from being made public. I have deployed Alain Badiou's *theoretical fury* as a weapon to rebel against this situation. For how many more people have found their ideals about the world confirmed in art as opposed to politics? Is it not music, poetry, literature, philosophy, cinema, architecture and visual art that are always mentioned whenever we want to reach the essence of the primary significance that we ascribe to our existence? Things that by their very existence and the fact that they *have been made*, perpetuate the relationship between the individual and a possible collective. Is it not the case that any ideal connected to a representation of the world can be reduced to the arts? In my worldview, the view from which I *desire to create the world*, the answer can be nothing other than an unequivocal YES. Even before democratism can start to work, we need ideals that are founded by the arts, from which a politics – in a bureaucratic sense and through individual representation – can express itself.

The *human shortcoming* controlling our society is an inability to imagine what politics *could be*. It is the narrow and suffocating concept of politics that has given bureaucratic politics its actual power, a power resulting from a view of society in which a bureaucratic politics would be the *only possible politics*. The power of this bureaucratic politics has perpetuated the idea that our current interpretation of democratism is the

*only possible form of politics*. This situation has led to the de-politicisation of our society and to the *de-politicisation of the arts*, and has therefore been successful in demanding the sole right to power. A power maintaining the illusion that *we* are the ones that have constituted it, that it is the result of our own incompetence to provide society with a different design, with a different political vision and above all else, with an essentially *political act*.

This brings us to the true challenge that lies ahead. A consistent reworking of the inherent contradictions of democratism can only lead to its actual dissolution. If we propose a Beuysian interpretation of politics in which the dynamic of society becomes the dynamic of a total artwork, this means that we will have to defeat the schizophrenia inherent to democratism. Because the essence of the stopgap that we call democratism today, implies that we always, absolutely and tragically, have to force a *separation* between the 'free ideas' of our private space and the public space in which we move as a collective and 'have to learn to live together'. In democratism the ideal of freedom is supported as the highest good, yet, in order to give everyone an equal place in a 'diverse society', *concessions* are necessary, or so we are told. These concessions in turn inevitably lead to a de-politicisation of that society. Why? Because it demands that we limit our ideals to the private sphere and therefore makes any idea about another form of society, and hence another form of politics, impossible. The sacrifices we make to live together in relative 'peace' are our potential ideas about a different form of society. In a seemingly natural way, we are required to give up our vision of a society in which thinking and acting could be unified, a society in which *true ideals* could be accomplished. We would not want to be held accountable for the violence and conflict produced by

such an aspiration for a different *political reality* – a different *political truth*, would we? This is the eternal argument that we are always presented with: beyond democracy there is only intolerance, violence and barbarism... My retort is that I *am* prepared to accept these consequences. My retort is a refusal to live in a world that does not allow me to make it *mine*. *Ours*.

This means that the role that I have ascribed to democratism in this essay is a temporary one. Democratism is a *transition model*. I believe that by fully propagating the inherently conflicting nature of democratism, the conditions of a different politics, the values that can establish a different idea of living together, will become visible.

I imagine what it will mean to realise Beuys' promise – the unification of life and art *through* a meeting of art and politics. That promise states that we can be *more* than the sum of the systems in which we are living. It states that we can be *more* than the willing victims of a systems that is always dictated by someone else. It states that we can be *more* than puppets taking a brief sojourn once every four years to the voting booth to carry out our civic duty, only to shift our attention to others that design *our* world. It is a promise that claims: *Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler* – Every human being is an artist. This is a promise from which we ought to draw the courage to imagine a different politics, one that will find acceptance through the consistent implementation of inconsistent democratism.

I declare my fidelity to this promise.

Already, I can imagine them, their pens poised and ready; they will say, 'where are your examples?' 'Show us the artists that will provide this democratism and its new, elevated image of humanity with prestige!' 'Show us the politician who listens and successfully advances

with the artist!' Or, 'show us an example of those who have already made a start, so we may fantasise about this possible future!' In other words: 'Give us the space to be critical. Allow us to form an opinion by combining concept and example!'

For those critics still hoping for my examples – by which they inevitably mean a mere *illustration* of the thoughts developed in this essay – I have only a single message, a message *they* will not understand.

This is only the *beginning*.  
A *different* art is coming.

And with it, an essentially *different* critique.

Jonas Staal.  
Rotterdam, 2009

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