On Beyond Allegories

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Open! invited writer E.C. Feiss for her opinion on the _Beyond Allegories_ congress held in Amsterdam in May 2014, in which the role of art within governance, political mobilisation and action was discussed. Feiss also addresses some of the propositions that were jointly formulated by artists and politicians on the occasion of the debate and are as well published by _Open!_.

Everyone is a politician. [1]

There are no political gains, measurable ones, without sacrifice. *Beyond Allegories* was a congress held at Amsterdam's city hall in May 2014, which introduced six propositions (published in *Open!*) concerning the use of art in directly addressing societal injustice, each of which were then formally challenged by four respondents. The event is one of a number of outcomes of a multi-year collaboration between Labour Party (PvdA) politician Carolien Gehrels, [2] artist Hans van Houwelingen and artist Jonas Staal. The congress followed the exhibition and programs of *Allegories of Good and Bad Government* at W139 in 2011 in Amsterdam which also, albeit in a form more akin to an artistic experiment, tried to strengthen the relationship between art and progressive politics at a time of – what is now seen to be perpetual – crisis in the Netherlands. [3]

While in recognition of the collaborative generation of the event, I came to contextualise *Beyond Allegories* as within Staal's repertoire, particularly in light of his ongoing "alternative parliament": *New World Summit* (2012–present). In this case, "summit" perhaps implicates non-governmental power as equal to elected governance in a project that similarly considers the way the material construction of procedure produces politics, and critically, outcomes. [4] The question of the authorship of the event is integral to its consideration of politics: no less the question, where do the lines of agency lie? Akin to the history of collaboration in Western feminist art for example, where authorship ebbed and flowed amongst a group, often as connected to strategic goals, I am choosing to hold Staal responsible for the event's form at this juncture. As part of any successful challenge to authorship, however, which this coalition certainly edges towards, this status is fleeting within a fluctuating lineage of influence and control. As collective work is not a space of perpetual equity, it is necessary to frame authority when it emerges, particularly in relation to the various struggles for power within the content of *Beyond Allegories* itself. To begin by ascribing aesthetic authorship to Staal also allows the formal constitution of the event to become available for critique as an artwork. And this artwork is one not only confined to questions of collectivity, but rather possesses the recurring motifs of an oeuvre, thereby removing the event, in part, from a reading that deducts "progress", "outcomes" or coalitional "success" through attachment to an ongoing practice.

Roughly speaking, the six proposals in *Beyond Allegories* addressed areas – urban renewal or transparency for example – that art and cultural work are not only well-suited to attend to, but are also the points at which the arts have historically intervened in society, to use an old maxim relying on an artificial divide. I don't discuss all of the propositions here, but rather isolate several instances of importance in order to elaborate on some of the larger

implications of the event. There was palpable consensus that *Beyond Allegories* offered, at the very least, a number of productive moments of debate and en some opportunities for the proposed schemes to be implemented. It should be said that I don't disagree with this assertion.

Forfeited in exchange for integration into politics, however, were the potentially critical aspects of the artwork *Beyond Allegories*. These resided in its formal constitution as a performance: the ways in which the event framed the time and procedure of politics, its presentation of political choreography as the vessel of decision making, and most excitingly, its use of various devices (simultaneous translators, the AV equipment of the town hall) to mediate and record the event, effectively displaying them as aesthetic mediums in and of themselves. While structural, these faculties arguably became secondary, and de-fanged, because their primary purpose, over and beyond a critical undertaking, was to provide a ground of legibility for the process of politics.

Beyond Allegories both stems from the academic moment of – and rails against – political theorist Chantal Mouffe's conception of art's critical potential. In her configuration, both "politics" (organised governance) and "the political" (agonism, that which denaturalises the hegemonic order through conflict) were present. But it is clear that there had been, either by Staal or as a result of a collaborative process clearly geared towards tangible outcomes, a definitive decision to privilege politics, and to cooperate insofar as to produce appreciable impact, rather than invest in the political capacity of art as resident in "making visible" dominant structures of commonsense. [5]

I am not suggesting that these concessions made in pursuit of art's total involvement are to be decried. Rather, I outline them to begin with a contextualisation of Staal's position here, one that is bound to a thorny, yet crucial, question of strategy and of ethics. In part, the event's rejection of the denaturalisation gesture was part of its progressivist stance. The "beyond" of its title (officially conceived in relation to the previously mentioned *Allegories of Good and Bad Government*), I would argue, can be read in relation to art as allegory, or denaturalisation, articulating a moving on from what is in effect defined as critical artistic practice for a less-dire political moment. Denaturalisation is perhaps more effective, the event surmised, in historical periods when culture at large is off the cutting table. Progressivism was also present in the event's attachment to broadly sketched (uncritically forged out of efficacy) Leftist ideals of justice: for example, as was declared in almost every proposition, greater political participation as the route to emancipation, a deep-seated progressive ideal. [6]

The ethics the event offered, one of action beyond critical exposition, has theoretical bearings. As theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick once put it, writing with regards to a potential (which she states as at that time a potential that seemed possible in the United States context) government conspiracy behind the AIDS crisis: "Though fraught, the choice is not self evident: whether or not to undertake this highly compelling tracing and exposure project (to uncover such a conspiracy) represents a strategic and local decision, not necessarily a categorical imperative." [7] Because after all, "suppose we were sure of every element of conspiracy, that people in power look calmly on the likelihood of catastrophic environmental and population changes. What would we know then that we don't already know?" [8] Sedgwick was specifically concerned with the uncovering of injurious knowledge, which is also the nature of what was at stake throughout *Beyond Allegories*, no less, our collective unfreedom and also, how this unfreedom is striated, shared and interrelated just as it is also of steep disproportionate impact, as was testified by the We Are Here Cooperative in proposition three. [9]

Beyond Allegories questioned the efficacy of the "reveal" in its foundation, and as a platform, its purpose resided in producing a broader scope of cultural response. However, I

would further that Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading, the form of interventionist production she proposed for those innumerable cases where the production of visibility is ineffectual, is not as unburdened as *Beyond Allegories* tended to be – again, as a result of its having to do so, paradoxically, to get anything done. The disconnect is that the reparative is articulated by Sedgwick as a queer and otherwise marginal form of cultural production. Therefore, while *Beyond Allegories* might share some of its central values, an objective of being "additive and accretive . . . wanting to assemble and confer plentitude on an object that will then have resources to offer an inchoate self,"[10] the inchoate self here being stretched out to include a malformed and confused Left, it is difficult to imagine how reparative reading might figure within organised politics. However, I am choosing to read the impulse for repair (of society but also of a Leftist subject and community) in the event as aligned. Perhaps the reparative resides in a balance present but not maintained in *Beyond Allegories*. Sedgwick implores us not to abandon deconstruction, which would require a more forceful foregrounding of the form of the event (and by extension, the processual make-up of all parliamentary politics) but rather to employ both methods, that of the reveal and the reparative, towards the production of more equitable futures.

Structured by a constant state of running out of time, which highlighted yet another link between forums in art and in politics, the event was chaired by Ann Demeester (director of the Frans Hals Museum | De Hallen Haarlem) and Ruud Nederveen of the VVD (the neoliberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy), a combination which suggests the scrupulously curated nature of the participants. This type of casting was structural to the event's political realism, allowing for the inclusion of a range of voices from the political spectrum to align more closely with how a congress actually functions, and instituting a step away from the general insularity and Left-lean of the Dutch art world. However, such casting also underlines the fact that multiple layers of consensus, both in baseline belief (by definition, everyone in attendance agreed that "art" and "politics" can and should work together) and an orientation in relation to the well-known nature of Staal's politics (for example, to be able to read Nederveen and Demeester as a contrasting couple) were foundational of the event. This gesture, inclusion of farther Right personalities functioned in both good faith so to speak, in the spirit of working together, and also to legitimise the artwork – inclusions resistant to, yet unsuccessful in combating, a generally Leftist political consensus. No actual debate was going to occur, for example, after Dilan Yesilgoz's (VVD) response to the fourth proposition, "Transparency", a proposal for the use of culture (specifically design) in "making visible" the operations of the Deep State. Yezilgoz espoused a centrist position on consent in the use of technology, a stance which denies not only the capacity and extent of the Deep State (willfully ignoring the high-profile leaks of the past year) but operates within a paradigm where technology is still a free choice, rather than an economic imperative. Her inclusion was part of the "procedural" aesthetic of the event, and therefore her remarks created no friction: an underlying foundational consensus was acceptance of the fact of a Deep State. I am not suggesting I do not also share this assertion, but rather that such a belief is also indicative of why I was in attendance. I point this out to showcase the elements that were included as part of the artwork, which functioned in fact to stem agonistic confrontation, illustrating how both art and politics (both being procedural) can bar factional encounters. The only junctures of "agonism", which were, by definition, entirely productive, were those that delineated critical discrepancies on the Left.

In the first proposition, "Democratic Reform *[www.onlineopen.org/plea-for-a-free-zone]*", Salima Belhaj (D66 or Democrats 66) [11] and the theatre group Wunderbaum discussed the active initiative of establishing "free zones" in Rotterdam, as "a space of experimentation (and) as the core of democracy: democracy as a space where authority does not interfere–'unless something goes wrong.'" A coalition between Wunderbaum and the city of Rotterdam, the project is based on the theatre group's project *The New Forest*, a free zone on top of an old train station which became a "a public parliament" where "new

models of democracy" were tested. [12] A red flag in Belhaj's proposal, however, was the institution of "some rules" for the free zone, or the involvement of the city where absolutely necessary if "something goes wrong." Philosopher Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei's response explicated the central problematic in instituting a free zone governed by undefined, supposedly self-evident rules, and the rally that ensued between him and Belhaj acutely demonstrated a debate on unshared terms: where Oei presented the theoretical impossibility (and hegemonic danger) of a free zone that adheres to rules of health and safety (specifically rules which are removed from public jurisdiction), Belhaj offered only the certain terms of commonsense. However, the proposition also presented one of the paradoxes of *Beyond Allegories* as a whole: that is, the capacity of art is revealed as its ability to create platforms for exchange which are not established in institutional terms. In other words, *The New Forest* was successful as an art project because it carved out a space for public exchange uninitiated by the state, a corporation or one of their auxiliaries.

The role of Wunderbaum was to absorb the terms of whatever institutional funds that were involved in financing the project, and provide an alternative framework, one with not less but different forms of hierarchy and exclusion for the "people's parliament". Oei rightfully pointed out that upon translating the project into an iteration that becomes a government initiative – the proposition – while a true collaboration between art and government, created a frightening beast. Therein, it is possible to see how a progressive position (that of D66 in this instance), one invested in art and in democracy, could create the conditions for enhanced forms of social control, such as the institution of a free zone "until something goes wrong," pre-establishing the basis of – and guaranteeing – an inevitable state of exception. It becomes a good analogy for democracy at large, always truncated for our safety. Quinsy Gario, an artist, poet and activist in the movement against Zwarte Piet, (Black Pete), [13] referenced an incident in Rotterdam in addressing Belhaj, not elaborating on the details, to underscore how a purportedly neutral or unspecific approach to the governance of public space usually has racist outcomes.

I was very much an outsider at the event, struggling at times to get all of the references by pestering Dutch people around me for more information. Given that the Dutch art world often operates in English, it seemed another "realist" statement to hold the majority of the debates in Dutch. This was equally a functional decision in view of contextualising the proceedings within local and national political dilemmas, which while not exclusive to the Netherlands, became expressed as of immediate concern to this country presently. In the context of this event, rather than their natural habitat of government or law, the simultaneous translators were shown to be singular characters: one was more reserved, taking on the cadence of a BBC anchor, and the other was exuberant, gesturing broadly and replicating facial expressions to the point that it was difficult to concentrate on the content of what was being said, so in awe was I of a simultaneous translation that was also enacted as part of its linguistic accuracy. This was perhaps partially to do with *Beyond Allegories* having retained the melodrama and ambit of personalities of much cultural symposia, but it was also a compelling testament to the performance – and internal stagings – of all politics.

Mariko Peters's (GroenLinks) performance as part of the second proposition, "Extra-Parliamentary Democracy *[www.onlineopen.org/towards-an-extra-parliamentary-democracy]*", was particularly stirring, and certainly pushed the more active translator into frenzied rendition. [14] Peters and Staal presented the project "0." (read: zero point), a social media platform for sharing and organising Freedom of Information Requests. A collaboration between Peters, initiator of GroenLinks's Wet Open Overheid (a Freedom of Information Act) Staal and Metahaven, [15] the platform allows users to share the documents they've received as part of their requests, to search for documents using key terms and also has a newsfeed function, wherein users can specify keywords to alert them to recently posted documents of interest. This is an essential initiative, as anyone who has

ever submitted a Freedom of Information Request can attest. Not only does it minimise labour, eliminating crossover requests, it arguably builds solidarity through the gleaning, organising and "sharing" of previously classified knowledge.

However, how can social media, as a tool significantly involved in surveillance, offer transparency? In her response, artist Nicoline van Harskamp critically attested that simply having information does not equal power, that is, the ability to do anything with that information. I would add that while the use of a social media platform certainly capitalises on a powerful form, this also means that a tool of liberation deals in that same distribution of social relation and structure of participation (interface) as that which upholds the opacity it seeks to address – a "can the master's tools dismantle the master's house?" dilemma. [16] If the project is about sharing governance, about radically broadening participation to an everyday usership, social media arguably conforms to the current relation of citizen to government, in the positioning of choice as multiple but bookended ("liking" something, or voting for it) for example. Most importantly, it is the further injunction to usership, and the sense that critique of this insatiably effective form is counterproductive that is most suspect. My criticism is meant to expand its purview, however, through explicating what seems a central quandary – predictably, in many ways not using social media is also unfeasible.

There were moments when art and "the artist" were so broadly sketched, gains made undoing certain assumptions, critically around artistic genius, felt bypassed. In proposition five, "Urban Renewal *[www.onlineopen.org/the-creative-city-a-blessing-for-administration-but-a-curse-for-the-arts]*", while critical of the uneven impacts of "the creative city", the emphasis still resided in artistic expertise and professionalism, rather than on the opportunities that exist for artists to build cross-class (cross-precariat) solidarity. The central conflict of proposition six *[www.onlineopen.org/democratising-the-arts]*, between the theatre practitioner Romana Vrede and artist Matthijs de Bruijne seemed to stem from a lack of specificity in what form of art was at stake in the discussion: speaking from a background in conceptual art vis à vis social practice, De Bruijne deplored the inaccessibility of contemporary cultural institutions, while Vrede, as a theatre practitioner, spoke of artistic inaccessibility as being part of its ability to inspire. This clash that is potentially between the belief systems of two distinct cultural lineages, is a point which was lost within the broadly stretched framework of the first proposition, "Cultural Representation".

The most dramatic proposition by far, however, was number three, "Immigration *[www.onlineopen.org/political-representation-beyond-citizenship]*", where Yoonis Osman Nuur, a representative from the refugee collective We Are Here, [17] and the artist Ahmet Ögüt, initiator of the Silent University, [18] gave an, at first, enthusiastically, and unproblematically, received proposal for the institution of two self-determined platforms for undocumented migrants: one addressing the right to learn and to participate, facilitated by We Are Here *[www.onlineopen.org/the-human-condition-of-being-undeportable]*, an undocumented political party, and one which addressed the right to use one's existing knowledge through the right to educate, enabled by the Silent University. We Are Here's institution of an undocumented political party, while also ingeniously capitalising on a political moment in which virtually any form of organisation can effectively be given civil rights (corporate personhood for example) responds to the problematic of Hannah Arendt's "the right to have rights". Rather than calling for human rights as undocumented people, which Arendt regarded as inherently suspect as rights are only guaranteed by, and able to be exercised within, political community, We Are Here instead claim their place in their chosen nation through confronting the logic of its distribution of power: one which values human capital (as a capitalist state) over appeals to humanism. As Nuur stated clearly, the Netherlands is simply "wasting human capital", and contradicting its dominant rationale, by refusing to grant legal status to its thousands of undocumented immigrants and refugees.

At first most people in the audience cried – it was easy to be moved by the work already undertaken. No challenges were brought forth, and instead each respondent simply declared unequivocal support for both initiatives. In an exceptional shift in tone and direction, one I have actually never witnessed within an art event before (it was the stuff of a tribunal) Maria Hlavajova (artistic director of BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht) accused the forum, and by extension I would argue the Left more broadly, of failing to approach the "problem" of immigration in the Netherlands as a systemic injustice. Her injunction was to "radicalize the protest", and she deplored the participants of the congress for continuing to support initiatives that amend or soften immigration policy, thereby upholding the fallacy that it is an issue of individual plight. At its best, ***Beyond Allegories*** created the conditions for confrontation with the core assumptions of a Left position, cathartically airing its failure to address urgent, contemporary wrongs. It is this reparative struggle that constitutes the integration of Sedgwick's reading into the arena of politics. While seemingly edging towards the creation of a political party, it remains to be seen whether ongoing "reparations", the production of alternatives alongside simultaneous critique, could survive such a founding.

All other video registrations of ***Beyond Allegories*** including the Introduction and Epilogue can be found on this page: www.vimeo.com.

Salima Belhaj & Wunderbaum, Plea for a Free Zone *[www.onlineopen.org/plea-for-a-free-zone]*

Mariko Peters, Metahaven & Jonas Staal, Towards an Extra-Parliamentary Democracy! *[www.onlineopen.org/towards-an-extra-parliamentary-democracy]*

Yoonis Osman Nuur & Ahmet Öğüt, Political Representation Beyond Citizenship *[www.onlineopen.org/political-representation-beyond-citizenship]*

Dirk Poot & Foundland, Mapping the Deep State *[www.onlineopen.org/mapping-the-deep-state]*

Carolien Gehrels & Hans van Houwelingen, The Creative City: A Blessing for Administration but a Curse for the Arts *[www.onlineopen.org/the-creative-city-a-blessing-for-administration-but-a-curse-for-the-arts]*

Ron Meyer & Matthijs de Bruijne, De Democratisering van de Kunst *[www.onlineopen.org/de-democratisering-van-de-kunst]*

Ron Meyer & Matthijs de Bruijne, Democratising the Arts *[www.onlineopen.org/democratising-the-arts]*

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Footnotes

1. GroenLinks (Green Party) politician Mariko Peters after Joseph Beuys.
2. Carolien Gehrels was an alderman for the PvdA in Amsterdam from April 2006 to May 2014.
3. For more information see www.allegoriesofgoodandbadgovernment.com.
4. New World Summit is an artistic and political organisation dedicated to providing "alternative parliaments" to host organisations that currently find themselves excluded from democracy. For more information see www.newworldsummit.eu.
5. See Chantal Mouffe, Rosalyn Deutsche, Branden W. Joseph, and Thomas Keenan, "Every Form Of Art Has A Political Dimension," *Grey Room 2* (2001): pp. 98–125.
6. See Duncan Kennedy's critique of the "Left project", particularly greater civic participation as always truncated by existing inequity. I would add that many of the central tenets of GroenLinks, such as belief in freedom and tolerance as part of party politics, are objects of the critique of progressivism that I am referencing. Duncan Kennedy, "The Critique of Rights in Critical Legal Studies," in *Left Legalism / Left Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 183.
7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, "Paranoid reading and reparative reading, or, you're so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you," in *Touching feeling: affect, pedagogy, performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123–152.
8. Ibid., quoting Patton, p. 123.
9. The We Are Here Cooperative is an organisation initiated by a group of undocumented refugees in the Netherlands which collectively fights for both asylum and public attention. For more information see www.wijzijnhier.org.
10. Sedgwick, p. 149.
11. D66 is a social-liberal party founded in 1966.
12. For more information see www.thenewforest.nl.
13. Zwarte Piet is a character in Dutch folklore tale of Sinterklaas. Zwarte Piet is a good example of when the impulse to "reveal" is redundant, as the injury itself is predicated on exaggerated visibility. To quote Sedgwick again: "What does a hermeneutics of exposure have to say to social formations in which visibility itself constitutes much of the violence?" Sedgwick, p. 140.
14. Staal and Peters were part of a group working to create an "extra-parliamentary fraction" of GroenLinks, which was to include artists among others, as a counterpart to their parliamentary fraction prior to the party's implosion in 2011. Their work has a precedent in the APO (Ausserparlamentarische Opposition, extra-parliamentary opposition) of the late 1960s, which was based on the argument that there was no longer any truly political, systemic opposition within parliament.
15. Metahaven is a studio for design and research based in Amsterdam, www.metahaven.net.
16. See Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), pp. 110–114.
17. For more information see www.wijzijnhier.org.
18. For more information see www.thesilentuniversity.org.

Crosslinks

Plea for a Free Zone: www.onlineopen.org/plea-for-a-free-zone
Towards an Extra-Parliamentary Democracy!: www.onlineopen.org/towards-an-extra-parliamentary-democracy
The Creative City: A Blessing for Administration but a Curse for the Arts : www.onlineopen.org/the-creative-city-a-blessing-for-administration-but-a-curse-for-the-arts
Democratising the Arts: www.onlineopen.org/democratising-the-arts
Political Representation Beyond Citizenship: www.onlineopen.org/political-representation-beyond-citizenship

The Human Condition of Being Undeportable: www.onlineopen.org/the-human-condition-of-being-undeportable
Plea for a Free Zone: www.onlineopen.org/plea-for-a-free-zone
Towards an Extra-Parliamentary Democracy!: www.onlineopen.org/towards-an-extra-parliamentary-democracy
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The Creative City: A Blessing for Administration but a Curse for the Arts : www.onlineopen.org/the-creative-city-a-blessing-for-administration-but-a-curse-for-the-arts
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