

The Radical Other

A Conversation about Amsterdam 2.0

Tom McCarthy

Interview – May 1, 2006

In the project Amsterdam 2.0, a political model is developed, in which the idea of democracy is once more given content and meaning. The key phrase here is ‘radical tolerance’: the co-existence of the absolutely sovereign and the radical other. British artist / writer Tom McCarthy interviews artist Paul Perry and architect Maurice Nio on the meaning and possible implications of this model.

Devised by a ‘shadow city planning office’ in Amsterdam, Amsterdam 2.0 is a constitutional document outlining a future civic system. Rather than envisage an alternative city, Amsterdam 2.0 provides a framework out of which many different cities can arise and inhabit the same territory. People become citizens of one or other city by subscribing to this city’s rules. One city’s rules are often entirely incompatible with another’s. The only fundamental rule – set down in the Amsterdam 2.0 constitution – is that the citizens of one city cannot impose their will on those of another.

An empty framework within which many different legal systems can be active at the same time and place, Amsterdam 2.0 was conceived as a decentralized and polycentric constellation to create a space for the living experiments and survival strategies which an era of failing politics and compulsory political correctness have made necessary.

Although, once explained, nearly everyone can appreciate the theoretical beauty of polycentric jurisprudence, it is difficult to get an idea of how Amsterdam 2.0 would work in practice without concrete examples. Once the shadow planners had devised their constitution, they therefore named 400 possible cities and invited five authors to write stories using the Amsterdam 2.0 constitution as a framework. The stories (by Nick Barlay, Tim Etchells, Tom McCarthy, Arjen Mulder and Maaïke Post and Dirk van Weelden) paint pictures of life in the 400 different cities with their completely divergent rule systems.

Upon completion of the stories, five visual commissions were handed out based on the stories in order to test the practicability of the Amsterdam 2.0 vision. These commissions (given to Kasper Andreasen and Tine Melzer, Henk Bultstra and Jaakko van ’t Spijker (SPUTNIK), Elma van Boxel & Kristian Koreman (ZUS), Sung Hwan Kim & the Lady of the Sea, and Joke Robaard), resulted in five different projects that explore and interrogate the texts.

In spite of the fact that the projects differ strongly from each other, they have one thing in common: each portrays a personal journey of discovery through what for everyone is a situation unimaginable and yet real. This is probably the only manner of finding one’s way around a city where the compass of routine and obviousness has been lost.

TOM MCCARTHY

Talk me through the genesis of this project.

PAUL PERRY

The project's initial impetus came in 1995 from Ronald van Tienhoven, an artist who was then working as an 'internal advisor' for the Praktijkburo, a national bureau for 'art in public space' (now called SKOR). At the time Ronald brought a team of four very different people together: the Rotterdam architect Maurice Nio who was then well known for his work under the name of NOX; an Amsterdam 'child of the sixties' by the name of Huib Schreurs, who I understand established 'Paradiso' as an important cultural centre in Amsterdam; the Amsterdam artist and photographer Gerald van der Kaap, who was well known for his club work; and myself, a sculptor, who was living in Groningen at the time. The four of us were chosen to form a sort of shadow city planning office. We worked together 2.5 days a week for a period of 8 months. Our mission in a nutshell: 'to initiate ideas and realize projects' pertaining to the future of Amsterdam.

TMCC

Is Amsterdam 2.0 simply a left-field piece of urban planning, or would you situate it elsewhere in terms of its status as a project? It is so rife with fictions and metaphors that I wonder if it isn't less about harnessing art for the cause of civic thinking than about transforming or 'détourning' civic thinking into art practice.

PP

If anything, Amsterdam 2.0 is more 'right-field' than 'left-field', though I wouldn't put it that way myself... But yes in one sense... someone was trying to harness 'artists' for the cause of civic thinking. But I've never thought about the project as situationist. Amsterdam 2.0's language is too serious, too real for that. . . though it is not an easy language. Nor is it the language of the stadhuis and its urban planners. But what do you mean by 'rife with fictions and metaphors'? Are you implying that fiction isn't true and therefore dismissible by the regents of the concrete world as a form of 'fantasy'?

MAURICE NIO

I think there are two fundamental misunderstandings in Tom's question. The first misunderstanding – in my opinion – is that Paul and I don't think of the project as a fiction or metaphor but as a (future) reality. With this in mind we invited the participants of the most recent phase of the project to write narratives and produce visual artifacts documenting this reality. The fact that most of those invited wrote and produced

SF

-like narratives and visual pieces as if we were dealing with metaphors has been a big disappointment. Please understand: Amsterdam 2.0 isn't a fiction. We aren't interested in fantasies and fairy tales unless we can take them literally. The second misunderstanding – again in my opinion – is to see art as an autonomous field and planning and lawmaking as another political and metaphysical domain. That simply isn't so. Amsterdam 2.0 doesn't want to make some fictive opposition stronger or change their views to its own, but wants instead to 'prune'. Sometimes one must – like a gardener – cut away branches of plants and trees to make them more beautiful and to allow them to bloom – literally and figuratively. Planning and what is known as democratic lawmaking rely upon humanistic and moralist views and opinions, just as most public art does. With this in mind we found

ourselves shortly after the project started adopting Paul Treanor's motto: 'Cities are for change, not for people.'

PP

You know, the more I think about this 'reality' versus 'fiction' issue – the more confused I become. If you look at it from up close it seems that reality versus fiction is a false dichotomy. A dichotomy which every adult human being uses when they need to distinguish the 'serious' – acts and decisions which have repercussions for themselves and others – from the 'not serious'. Given this I'm often surprised how fast and how emphatically we who make our living exploiting our imaginative capabilities join the others in proclaiming such a false distinction. Amsterdam 2.0 is definitely real. It is real not only because you and I believe in it but also because it is a system which doesn't fall apart five minutes later. As a world it is both consequent and consistent. It is also completely fantastic in the sense that it remains, for you and me, and for everyone who has worked on it – virtually unthinkable.

MN

That's true. But there's a big difference between the unthinkable of Amsterdam 2.0 and the presumed unthinkable of the world of the situationists. Where once Guy Debord, as a sort of spoiled dandy, believed we could escape the duality reality-fiction through methods and strategies such as *dérive* and *détournement* – by this point we've been totally conditioned by the same methods. The reality-fiction construct itself has become a monstrous 'drift' and Amsterdam 2.0 is evidence of this. Thus the word 'unthinkable' doesn't mean that we collectively are unable to see the near future but rather that the near future is unable to see us. The present is blind or, at the very least, utterly short-sighted when it comes to the classical opposition between reality and fiction. That's why it's so damned difficult to produce a project which addresses life beyond this point. Amsterdam 2.0 is unthinkable because we as human beings, as beings who live in different cultures, are no longer seen and recognized by the present. What I mean to say is this: all results of political, economic and cultural processes have become unthinkable because we are standing in the middle. We can't take a critical distance. Is this the reason why we are forced to take a 'scatter shot' approach? The City of 400 Blows: Amsterdam 2.0 is a project for 400 possible cities.

PP

In that list we once made suggesting the names and corresponding *raison d'être* for 400 possible cities, wasn't there a City of Believers? At least now we can see how wrong that distinction was . . . As it is obvious that every city in Amsterdam 2.0 must be a city of believers. Does this somewhat answer your question, Tom?

TMCC

Yes. For me, fiction is not opposed to 'the real'. Both are constructs. Both are deeply intertwined with one another. I don't write to escape into fairy tales, but because of a belief (to use a term that came up a moment ago) in the power of the fictive to grasp and transform the world at every level. Still, though, a distinction can be made between choosing a 'fictive' mode of discourse and a pragmatic one. When I say Amsterdam 2.0 is 'rife with fictions' I mean that, rather than use a pragmatic language, it proposes an array of cities that could only be described as heavily 'figural', poetic: City of Bullfighters, City of Code, City of Anachronists and so on. Why choose those titles? Unless you actually intend for people who understand themselves as 'anachronists' to subscribe to this third city, the term must be a marker for a wider set of conditions or adherences. And the interesting question then is: what type? How interpreted? Executed? Experienced?

MN

You've got a good point. I suppose it is due to Paul and me that the project appears as you say, 'heavily figural' and poetic. Even if it was possible to work out details without the help of an 'image', I doubt we would choose to do so or that such an approach would be effective. Images – the essence of poetry – transform and kidnap reason. This is why we've taken a somewhat indirect approach and didn't name the City of Bullfighters the City Where One is Allowed to Sacrifice Humans and Animals. The former name opens up more mental space. Space where others might experience some sort of recognition, and if they wished, enter the space and do something with it. The 400 'poetic' names also indicates another choice, which is to work from the bottom up, from a single detail, a detail that might inspire the soul of an entire city. In this way we hope to imagine a more interesting city. More interesting than if we imagined the city from the perspective of the whole.

PP

Providing the cities with names was an impulse, an exercise without too much thought which we conducted many years ago. The fact that the names stuck isn't too surprising – given the power of names – but apart from what Maurice has just said, in my mind there has also been a serious downside to the list of names in relation to the entire project. When one sits down and reads such an 'a priori list' it is easy to think that we – the creator of the names – are either being facetious and filling in our own mad desires, or – and this in my opinion presents a more serious stumbling block to someone else entering the project – assume that we thought it possible to believe in 400 names and thus 400 different belief systems. This is not only preposterous but impossibly schizophrenic. If anarchy means doing away with a centralized government determining what is right and wrong for everyone – we aren't the only ones who feel that today's liberal and universal laws which are meant for everyone are in fact for no one – then Amsterdam 2.0, the entire safe haven that allows 400 different legal systems is anarchistic, not just the City of Anarchists. However, this does not mean that Amsterdam 2.0 is lawless. It is anything but lawless. Each of the 400 different systems must determine 'what is right' and provide an equal number of determinations of 'what is wrong' and – unfortunately for our anarchist – 400 different versions of enforcement. Can you imagine living in an environment with 400 different types of enforcement? 400 different types of cop? Imagine being out for a stroll with your four-year-old daughter and on the way stumbling across a public execution of a citizen of the City of Bullfighters as ordered by the City of Bullfighter's court and carefully prescribed in its criminal code. Not only are you and your daughter suddenly witness to a citizen being executed but you are witnessing an execution in the historic style of Lingchi or the 100 Pieces Chinese Torture.

TMCC

And the father and daughter might belong to the City of Human Rights or Anti-Executionists. So there's a clash of modes, of values or beliefs. I had a sequence in my

'dystopian' fictional response to the project where a stray dog wanders through the Vondelpark and citizens of the City of Dog Eaters want to cook it, the citizens of the City of Animists want to make friends with it and citizens from the City of Perverts want to fuck it. There's this constant colliding-together of systems in your vision, a sense that they can operate alongside one another even when they're mutually contradictory. Perhaps what you're describing is not anarchy but agonistics, in the sense in which Jean-Francois Lyotard uses the word.

MN

Agonistic is indeed the right term. Anarchy, in a way, gives us the promise that everybody can be the same and equal in a wild system, while agonistics, in a total other way, set an order where everybody can be totally different in a totally ruled system. This is the most crucial point of Amsterdam 2.0, where we have to consider how an agonistic system – a system of radical tolerance – can work practically.

PP

I agree, Amsterdam 2.0 is a system of radical tolerance. But what does the competitive tension of agonistics have to do with what we are talking about? To be honest I don't see the cities as competing with each other. But then again I'm not at all familiar with Lyotard's use of the word.

TMCC

I've heard this term, 'radical tolerance', bandied around before in relation to this project. I wonder how you, Maurice and Paul, would understand this term from your respective architectural and artistic points of view.

PP

Ah, there's the rub. Radical tolerance means a world where each party (or in this case city) is tolerantly fundamental.

MN

You can only talk about tolerance when you are sovereign. You can only talk about radical tolerance when the idea of sovereignty is carried out fully. As an artist or architect it's the task to produce singular objects or works, which produces sovereignty. So by creating a city (for instance) which is singular, you create sovereignty, and therefore parties who are tolerantly fundamental.

TMCC

Tolerantly fundamental or fundamentally tolerant? Are subscribers to the City of Fascists (to take an obvious example) there because they share their belief in totalitarianism with a belief in plurality, or do they aspire to make every city a City of Fascists?

PP

Not fundamentally tolerant. Tolerantly fundamental. You could say that our world today – our world of late-capitalist ideals – requires each of us to be fundamentally tolerant. Amsterdam 2.0 requires something different: citizens of cities are obligated by law to tolerate citizens of other cities but 'at home' within their own legal system no tolerance is required.

TMCC

You've described Amsterdam 2.0 as a return to Amsterdam's first principles: a kind of dynamic capitalist hub that allows for a convergence of radically diverse systems under one regulating superstructure. And this superstructure, in the original version of Amsterdam, was always an economic one, essentially: the laws were there to facilitate good trading – not the other way round. Does this aspect continue through to your new version of Amsterdam, or is the relationship reversed?

PP

I don't think 'tolerance' was ever formally embodied within Dutch seventeenth-century law – and if it was I think it would have more likely been formalized in church law – but tolerance was certainly celebrated as a cultural phenomenon. And yes, there would have been some awareness that this shared and transmitted cultural rule, this meme, tolerance, facilitated good trade. Another idea which has always intrigued me but which I've never been able to follow up is that tolerance naturally emerges from one of the tenets of Calvinism, namely one should not interfere with another's moral dilemma. Or perhaps an even more radical idea: tolerance emerges from the notion of predestined or unconditional 'election'. But to answer your question: while these historical precedents may play a role in the shaping of Free-Trade City or Neo-Calvinist City they certainly wouldn't apply to all of Amsterdam 2.0's cities.

TMCC

I'm still intrigued by this dual concept of being 'at home' and simultaneously accommodating radical otherness. This goes back further than Calvinism or the foundation of the first Amsterdam – it goes right back to the origins of Western thought, to the Greeks. In Aeschylus's *Eumenides*, Athens takes in Orestes despite the fact that he has murdered his mother, something that would seem abhorrent to all their laws, and this gesture forms the bedrock of Athenian democracy – that is, of democracy itself. I wonder if, fundamentally, Amsterdam 2.0 isn't a meditation on the notion of democracy – one that divorces it from the neo-liberal impasse it finds itself in the world today and returns it to its radical origins.

PP

Do you honestly think that any single democratic system, even your bedrock Athenian democracy, can truly accommodate absolute otherness? When the Athenians took in Orestes they assumed he'd already killed his mother, that his mother killing was in his past and that he had no more mothers to kill. But what if, while staying in Athens, Orestes kept killing his mother? What if he killed his mother five times a day? What I'm saying is of course temporally impossible – at least within the temporal world most of us inhabit – but here's my point: no system can accommodate extreme or radical otherness without itself being deeply disrupted and breaking down. Now of course we can say that's fine, that's change, that's paradigm shift. But cultural systems aren't science. Have you ever watched Nicolas Roeg's *The Man who Fell to Earth*?

TMCC

Yes, it's a great film. What's the connection?

PP

I find the film terribly disturbing. In the film the other arrives, in this case the other being an entity from outside of the system. I think your phrase 'radical other' applied here would be completely justified. And what do we do? Nothing. Nothing except kidnap the entity and surgically alter it in such a way so that it can never prove that it is not human. That's what I would call a warm welcome.

TMCC

In a way that film is like Kafka's *The Hunger Artist*: keep the stranger in a cage because we don't know what to do with him. This ties in with what Maurice was saying about sovereignty. In the Man who Fell to Earth example, our sovereignty relies on suppressing the other's difference. But in the best philosophical formulations of ethics – Emmanuel Levinas's, notably – ethics is born of a fundamental interruption by the other. I am ethical not because I am sovereign and tolerant, but because I am confronted and shaken down, left incomplete, by the other's absolute otherness. The other doesn't have to explain or justify himself: all he says (according to Levinas) is me voici, 'Here I am' – kind of like a weird neighbour you pass on the staircase every morning. Maybe your creation – Amsterdam 2.0 – is ultimately a radical reflection on ethics.

PP

Maybe. I certainly like Levinas's conception of ethics being born when faced by the absolute otherness of any other.

MN

The 'other' is definitely not a stranger, but someone you can't 'see', can't comprehend. The other is maybe not the man who fell to earth, but (as Tom suggests) the neighbour next to you who is cursing, or smoking, or dressed in a burka. What can you do when your belief system, your city rules, tell you that cursing, or smoking, or being unrecognizable is totally out of the question? In our present moral and ethical law system there is no solution, other than a violent one (take the simple example of the unsolvable situation between the Palestinians and the Jews). But when you embody your city rules in an amoral law system then there is only a difference of belief systems. Of course there still will be fights and violent situations, but they will be short, because conflicts are simply too expensive. This is the point where the rational – or economic as you say – Dutch attitude in the seventeenth century maybe coincides with our project.

PP

As I understand Levinas every other is sufficiently other to bring an ethical relation about, to confront and shake oneself down – no? If this is so you could also argue that ethics emerges from a sovereign position, where one feels neither the need to assimilate others nor the need to separate themselves from them. Or am I mistaken?

TMCC

The liberal-humanist take on Levinas would try to maintain the sovereignty of the subject who cohabits harmoniously with the other. But what I think is really compelling about Levinas is that he stages his arguments in the most extreme and violent of situations: torture, murder, being 'taken hostage' – these limit-situations in which sovereignty breaks down. The ethical moment for him – the real ethical moment – is so extreme that it is almost unthinkable. Which, if I recall correctly, is a term you both used earlier in this interview: Amsterdam 2.0 is characterized by 'unthinkability'. Maurice talked about this unthinkability in terms of a blind spot within the present, a blind spot which we inhabit, invisible. I want to return to this: I find it very intriguing. Is Amsterdam 2.0 an attempt to 'see' that blind spot, or to be seen at it, in it?

MN

It is an attempt to start to live in it, and therefore indeed to be seen in it. But it's not an attempt to 'see' it, to see some kind of blind spot. First of all, we cannot see Amsterdam 2.0 because it's beyond humanistic perspectives, beyond human ethical point of views. Second, the other – your future, your death, your constellation, your neighbour, your dog, your child, your building, your art work – cannot look at us, because we are the blind spot. Everything that we produce enters that blind spot. We only can construct a set of rules trying to unfold this 'unthinkable' new paradigm and to be seen by the other. Maybe that is the beauty of Amsterdam 2.0: a paroxysm of visibility, an attempt to make us visible to the other, in stead of trying to cope with him.

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Photo Joke Robaard

Tom McCarthy is an artist and writer based in Londen. Tom McCarthy's novel *Remainder*, which deals with trauma and repetition, won the Believer Book Award 2007 and is currently being adapted for cinema. His new novel, *C*, which is about the relationship between technology and mourning, will be published in 2010.

Tags

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