General

It Starts Now

Jonas Staal

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We must find the right allies to show that art can be a tool used to break down the barriers that prevent engagement and the creation of different public domains.

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Dear Jorinde,

We as artists want to shape the world. But the world also shapes us. We are an integral part of politics. But, the question is: What shape does this politics take? You asked me to write about my agenda for experimental, "glocal" art, culture, and the public domain in the specific context of the Dutch cultural landscape after the massive budget cuts that our previous government, supported by the extreme nationalist Freedom Party, embarked upon (my agenda certainly starts with getting rid of that term, "glocal"…). Budget cuts which have, among other issues, forced many critical magazines like *Open!* to shift toward digital publishing.

I was surprised that the rise of the extreme nationalists, with the massive culture cuts as a result, for many came as something out of the blue. My political consciousness and artistic practice is a product of arriving in Rotterdam after having finished art school. For six years from 2004 to 2010, I lived and worked in the old working-class neighbourhoods in the southern part of the city. The part that was not then designated for "gentrification," and where class and cultural conflicts did not need to be explained by political representatives: it was right there before my eyes, from the kids throwing stones into buildings late at night, my cigarette salesman who was harassed on a daily basis, the "preventive searches" by the police that only seemed to apply to residents of colour, the permanent neighbourhood patrols and excessive camera surveillance. That was the "public domain" that shaped my artisthood. It was a public domain where it was not difficult to see what was coming.

In 2004, Theo van Gogh was murdered in Amsterdam by a self-declared Islamic fundamentalist, while Rotterdam was still recovering from the murder of Pim Fortuyn by an animal rights activist two years before. Many had been waiting to blame the immigrant communities that had already been targeted by Fortuyn, but who – unfortunately for the extreme nationalists – had not actually murdered him (nor did "they," for that matter, murder anyone else and, considering that "they" mostly all have Dutch passports, the distinction finally seems to simply come down to skin colour). This was the moment of catharsis. The issue of immigration could finally be conflated with the myth of "Islamisation". My neighbour, who had obvious sympathies for the neo-Nazi that cruised my block, had one of his only good days when the news of this second political murder was announced. Upon my return home I met him in the hallway and he gave me a gloomy look, saying only: "It starts now." And so it did. Van Gogh's murder created the political landscape in which the Freedom Party came to power in 2010. Its extreme nationalist-leaning coalition government lasted just two years, as did the public resentment and

mobilisation that resulted from it. New elections were held in 2012 and we have since been governed by a coalition of moderate parties – conservative liberals and social democrats united by an agenda that entails "management", with a focus on budget cuts that are meant to keep the economic crisis that is haunting Europe at bay. But the policies of the former extreme nationalist coalition government remain intact, and the current government's symbolic policy changes, such as the legalisation of certain illegal immigrant children (however important this may be for the individuals involved), have not prevented their overall policies of exclusion from continuing; the status of refugees is that they will soon be declared "illegal" by the current government. Moreover, foreign aid cuts have been massive. Prisons risk being privatised. The list is long... Culture has been turned into an industry that has to combine blockbuster formulas with a new "reasonable" nationalism, fitting the "reasonable" new face of a government unwilling to unequivocally reject the legacy of the extreme nationalists. The corporate sponsored reopening of the Rijksmuseum represented an example of "positive nationalism" that combined cultural heritage with the much-debated creation of a national history museum forms the most recent culmination of these policies. Rijksmuseum director, Wim Pijbes, even suggested adding the gun used to kill Fortuyn to the new national history museum, thus showcasing – historicizing – the "fear" that has defined the state of our nation in the past decade.

Rotterdam taught me that if art is capable of manifesting itself as more than just a "reflection" of the idealised human condition that only exists between the clean walls of our surviving institutions, we can actually shape a different present, rather than simply commemorating our lost past or idealising our future. This can be done by applying practices within the actual political arena of the public domain that has either been neglected or distorted by opportunistic and dangerous political powers. I understood that the knowledge produced by art is a result of its capacity to respond to the social texture that defines our public domain in ways more complex and concrete than our political system is capable of. It is art's responsiveness that can serve as a tool to help reorganise and reshape our realities. But that means we have to *open* our practices to forms of politics that are often unrecognized. If art can help these realities to manifest themselves, to be shaped by them and shape them at the same time, a different understanding of our practice will become possible. We can thus arrive at a level understanding that may save us from the dominant appeasement policies that I believe are not ours, or, at least, which oppose my understanding of progressive art and progressive politics. So when you ask about my agenda for art, culture, and the public domain in the cultural desert that the extreme nationalists hope to leave as their "legacy", I ask myself the question, which public domain? Because our choice of which political reality we want to confront, our choice of allies (so not those responsible for the dismantling of progressive culture over the past decade) will also define the *kind of art practice* that we will end up developing. It is for this reason that my focus over the past years has been on collaborations with progressive political parties, NGOs, social movements, banned political organisations, and other forms of non-parliamentary politics, because I believe a *different art* *[www.onlineopen.org/beyond-allegories]* can only emerge if we align ourselves with a *different political project*. Before the rise of the extreme right, your magazine was called *Open*, as if openness was a given, something we used to take as a natural condition of our everyday life in the "tolerant" country of the Netherlands. But more recently you changed your name to *Open!* In other words, openness is no longer simply a given; it has become a demand. A call to action. A call to defend the principles of a progressive politics in the face of the current process in which the continuation of the policies of the extreme nationalists are becoming normalised and institutionalised by the so-called moderates. So far, the cultural world seems all too happy to comply: revolt is, after all, not the most prominent characteristic of these cultural institutions (and a bad condition for obtaining subsequent funding). Thus we must find the right allies to oppose this normalisation and show that art can be a tool used to break down the barriers that prevent engagement and the creation of different

public domains. The extreme nationalists are still among us. The “third world” has not disappeared. The refugees are still lingering on our doorstep. Precarity is increasingly becoming our shared, global condition. That is the public domain we are part of, which is as much “local” as “global” but has been forced to invisibility by dominant powers in order for them to continue to pose as the only alternative. Art is not simply some luxury or artefact found in our national museums. It is a weapon with which we tear down the propaganda of the status quo in order to confront and change the concrete conditions of the world we inhabit. And as I embark on this project, I find myself willing to paraphrase:

It starts now.

My very best,

Jonas

Jonas Staal is a visual artist whose work deals with the relation between art, propaganda, and democracy. He is the founder of the artistic and political organization New World Summit, which develops parliaments for stateless political organizations, and the New World Academy (together with BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht), an educational platform for art and politics. His most recent publications include *Nosso Lar, Brasília* (Capacete & Jap Sam Books, 2014) on the relation between spiritism and modernism in Brazilian architecture. He currently finalizes his PhD research entitled *To Make a World: Art as Emancipatory Propaganda* at the PhDArts program at Leiden University.

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