Democratising the Arts

Ron Meyer, Matthijs de Bruijne

Column – August 19, 2014

The following text was developed on the occasion of the *Beyond Allegories* debate, for which 250 artists, politicians, union representatives, university professors, dramatists, representatives from refugee organisations and NGOs, journalists, and students gathered together for seven hours in Amsterdam's City Council to discuss the role of art within governance, political mobilisation and action. This debate was organised by Ann Demeester (De Hallen | Frans Hals Museum), Carolien Gehrels (until recently Alderman for Art & Culture, PvdA / Labor Party Amsterdam) and the artists Hans van Houwelingen and Jonas Staal in an effort to forge new progressive alliances. The text will be part of the DVD-book *Beyond Allegories*, a collection of the resolutions and videos that resulted from the project, which will be published this year.



Matthijs de Bruijne, Beyond Allegories, 2014. – Photo by Roos Trommelen

In 2011, the art sector was totally unexpectedly accused of turning its back to society, by politicians in their search for budget cuts. "Artists have alienated themselves from their environment," they claimed. But who is this "environment?" Did artists ever focus on the society as a whole, or did their audience already mainly consist of the wealthy and higher-educated few.

Almost everywhere in Europe art sector budgets have been cut under the pretense of the banking crisis. The louder the traditional elite accused the arts of turning their backs away from society, the faster the arts reoriented itself in a phenomenally opportunistic way back towards said elite. The result of this is that again a small group of people is in charge of setting the criteria of culture.

We, Ron Meyer (Socialist Party, Heerlen) and Matthijs de Bruijne (artist, Amsterdam) unite in our struggle against a limited view of art and culture and against a culture dominated by the rich. We ask policymakers, artists, and museum directors and cultural institutions to address the following question: Who is your audience?

1. Art as a Means of Expression

Everyone in our society has the right to develop himself or herself; art and culture have an important role and are crucial ingredients in this development. We want the political sphere to invest in artists who seek and activate debate within society. Above all, we advocate for artists who have a critical stance towards our current society and believe more in the "we" than the "I".

We believe in the timeless principle that a society invested in art and culture enables as many people as possible to reap the benefits of art. Art and culture might then, by definition, not only belong to those who already appreciate important paintings or interesting images.

However, today, investment in culture is important for another reason: at this moment, not only is our economy facing a crisis, but also our notions of democracy and classic forms of community. Art as a means for democratic expression of identity, cruel reality, and stimulating perspectives, of hope, doubt, struggle, and connection, is more important than ever.

Let us provide an example. In 2011, hundreds of protesting cleaners created their own ***Rubbish Museum*** *[afvalmuseum.info - Rubbish Museum (in Dutch)]* at Utrecht's central station with an exhibition of objects the cleaners had found while working. Each object symbolised a unique cleaners' story: from a syringe with which a cleaner had accidently punctured himself to a Bible to a vibrator to a teddy bear. Many artists and even more cleaners were skeptical at first. They said that art and the cleaners' cause could never go together. Nothing proved further from the truth: the ***Rubbish Museum*** became an important point of connection and cooperation between cleaners and art – and vice versa – as well as an important means of expression. In the middle of Utrecht's central station, cleaners appropriated art as a means to express their pride, identity and critique of society to thousands of visitors.

2. Art at the Centre of Society

In recent years, the provincial town of Heerlen in Limburg has been going against the grain by investing extra money in art and culture. The accompanying "Cultural Spring" – and within that, an implicit claim for the importance of culture in times of crisis – is supported by many of Heerlen's citizens. If a financially struggling provincial city like this can find the political motivation and civil support to invest in art and culture, then such action is possible anywhere.

One of the buildings Heerlen has activated as an art space is Schunk, located in the city centre. Since its use as a store in which mineworkers used to buy their products, Schunk, which resembles a glass palace, has become a multidisciplinary cultural institution that brings together an architectural institute, a visual arts collection, an exhibition space, a library, and a music and dance school. The remarkable display windows are now used as

exhibition spaces.

Schunk also organises projects in neighbourhoods and schools. It is a public space, an accessible cultural palace, aimed to bring as many people as possible from Heerlen into contact with art, literature and music. In many ways Schunk is a good example of a vital cultural scene, highlighting the lack of investment in art in other areas of the Netherlands. Yet however positive initiatives like Schunk are, as well as less accessible museums, they must ask themselves: Who saw our exhibitions, which segments of society? How do we reach those who have never passed through our doors?

These questions then incline us to ask: Why do we isolate our art and culture in places we know the majority of people will not visit? Why does art play such a limited and passive role in our public debates? Why do artists not seek the connection or confrontation with those who hardly ever or never visit a museum or theatre? And thus, how do we make sure more people feel "ownership" in one way or another over the imagination and inspiration that art lets forth?

"It is not about bringing art to the people, but about showing art in relation to the interests of your audience," according to Jean Leering, former director of Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. People's interests have many layers and levels. When art wants to play an active and imaginative role in our democracy, it should seek to occupy each of those layers and levels. Accessibility is about more than an open door. Accessibility is about using that open door to move in both directions, to bring art beyond the threshold and towards the people.

Let art take to the streets!

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

Essay by E. C. Feiss, On Beyond Allegories *[www.onlineopen.org/on-beyond-allegories]*

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 has led the largest party in Heerlen, the Socialist Party (SP), for the past eight years. Besides his work as a party leader, he works as a campaign leader for the labour union FNV Bondgenoten, where he has had a leading role in the cleaners' protests since 2009. Brave cleaners who rise up for a better future are for him "the example of strength and progress." In March 2014 Meyer received the Best Council Member Award in the Netherlands.

Matthijs de Bruijne's artistic practice and research often arise in collaboration with trade unions and other labor organisations. De Bruijne was closely involved in the cleaners' strike of 2012 for better wages, working conditions and social recognition. This strike was the longest strike in the Netherlands since 1933. As part of the cleaners union's campaign De Bruijne installed a temporary Rubbish Museum in Utrecht's central station and produced, in collaboration with the Domestic Workers Netherlands, several shadow plays.

Crosslinks

Plea for a Free Zone: www.onlineopen.org/plea-for-a-free-zone
Political Representation Beyond Citizenship: www.onlineopen.org/political-representation-beyond-citizenship
De Democratisering van de Kunst: www.onlineopen.org/de-democratisering-van-de-kunst
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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