Keeping the Peace

Klaas van Gorkum

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The Basque-Dutch artist duo Iratxe Jaio and Klaas van Gorkum have written a first-hand report about their experiences of working and living inside Occupy Amsterdam, a protest camp that appeared on a public square in the heart of the city at the end of 2011. This ideological enclave sought to distinguish itself from the social order that surrounded it by creating a radically inclusive and participatory form of democracy. The text is a reflection of how this ambition became entangled with the complex moral and political implications of providing some form of protection for the weak in the name of a common good, which is itself in the process of being renegotiated.

There are twelve of us this morning, sitting around the big wooden table in our tent, reading *The Social Contract* *[gutenberg.org - Read The Social Contract]* by Jean Jacques Rousseau. It has been over a month since we set up camp at the foot of the world's oldest stock exchange. The Beursplein, once an unimaginative square where tourists loitered, is now Occupy Amsterdam *[occupyamsterdam.nl - Occupy Amsterdam (in Dutch)]*. A miniature society made up of about a hundred little tents, crowding the pavement in eclectic disorder. A field kitchen and a big white circus tent mark the edges of this attempt to create an autonomous zone in the heart of the city. It is the living laboratory in which we are reinventing democracy from scratch.

After some fidgeting with the strings that hold the flap of our entrance down, a figure looks in from the outside. "Is this the Artists' Tent?" She is holding out two buckets of paint and a set of brushes. As her eyes become accustomed to the darkness inside, she inspects the scene, a little surprised. Our green army tent is arranged like an office, with fluorescent light hanging over a couple of laptops and a pile of books. It's not what she expected.

One of us diplomatically attempts to convey an appropriate sense of gratitude for her donation, while explaining to her why nobody in the tent actually paints. It's an awkward moment that underlines the unresolved contradictions of our presence in the camp.

Yes, this is the Artists' Tent. And what has brought us together is that obscure object of desire: an art that is truly political. But we are not just artists; we are also writers, composers, sociologists and economists. We are students and teachers, employed and unemployed, united by our will to rewrite the rules that define us as subjects. Our common project is the future, that wonderful wasteland on which we, master builders, shall transform the hopes and dreams of this movement into institutions and cathedrals.

And we'll start by destroying the worn-out clichés of political art from the past. So, no, my friend, we will not paint your protest signs for you any more. We will not provide you with illustrations of injustice and we won't design your propaganda.

That is because we're not interested in merely placing artistic practice at the service of this movement, as if it is something separate and external to it. We intend to make them one

and the same. Even if it means we'll have to relinquish that which identified us as artists: the production of anything that may be called art.

Sometimes we worry that our lofty ambitions might alienate us from those in the camp with more worldly views about what artists can contribute. But apart from incidental misunderstandings and some raised eyebrows, it has never really become an issue. Perhaps that is because this type of existential soul-searching is not just confined to the Artists' Tent.

Introspection is a chronic pathological condition of the Occupy movement. Everyone is constantly preoccupied with how much of their past to give up in return for a future that hasn't arrived yet. What if we fail? Or worse, what if we're successful? What if we do manage to change the world? What will it look like? Will it still need us? We share the restless anxiety of the revolutionary who knows one must become obsolete in order for the revolution to succeed.

Right now we must attend to more urgent matters, though. For it is proving increasingly difficult to reconcile the ambition of creating a radically inclusive and participatory form of democracy with the day-to-day reality of running a camp inside a major city. Dealing with problems such as violence, drug abuse and sexual intimidation – while maintaining order – has introduced what one of us has called "Rousseau-sized dilemmas", and opened the door to some remarkably undemocratic tendencies.

These dilemmas have started to dominate our conversations in the tent as well, lending an air of pertinence to our current reading group session on political theory. But it has become dark outside and it is time to bring the day to a close. Those of us whose turn it is to guard the tent bid the others farewell and tie down the flap after them. It is cold, and we huddle around the kerosene heaters, anxiously waiting for what the night will bring. For a while, there is relative calm, as the hubbub from the other tents peters out into a gentle murmur. Some of us even manage to catch some sleep.

Then, at three a.m., a student fraternity nearby closes. Drunken boys in blazers and ties spill out into the street and file past the camp, shouting obscenities. The bravest among them starts to piss on the canvas of the outer tents. "Fucking hippies, go home! Get a job!" A little later, punters from the Red Light District join their menacing chorus. From time to time, our tent shakes wildly, as someone pulls at the guy lines.

Amongst the jeering and shouting, we now hear low-key voices doing their best to defuse the situation. These are the peacekeepers, following a protocol that is short enough to be written on a crumpled piece of paper attached to the first aid tent: non-violent de-escalation of conflicts.

Most of us have done a shift of peacekeeping at some time or other. But it is hard to be active during the day and then have to stay up all night as well. Which is why, lately, it's always the same ones who end up keeping troublemakers out of the camp. The rest of us try to sleep; content to leave this unrewarding task to others.

A consequence of this routine is that the camp is separating into night owls and day-trippers. The peacekeepers have formed a powerful clique, which is worrying to those who feel that having an internal security force is antithetical to the principles of the movement. From time to time, this leads to an emotional stand-off. Today, the peacekeepers are trying to tear down the tent of a homeless person, notorious for his violent, psychotic spells. A crowd has gathered around them, yelling "Nazis! Nazis!"

The dispute comes up during the assembly that evening, and the big white circus tent turns into a heaving sea of angry faces. Wide-eyed newcomers, lost amidst the noisy remonstrations, observe the chaos with dread. What happens next, however, is nothing

short of a miracle. The sea parts and releases a few individuals who make their way to the front. They raise their hands, and the mob falls quiet. One by one, single voices call out their grievances. The crowd repeats them, like a human microphone, transforming their words into a low rumbling chant that rolls all the way to the back of the tent.

This is the General Assembly, the pearl of the Occupy movement, the temple in which we celebrate our togetherness. We do not come here to simply affirm who we are already. We come here to discover who we can be with others. This is the place where, night after night, consensus is wrought out of the multiplicity of our desires. It is the camp's most powerful institution and it is as close as we have come to the future we imagined for ourselves: an unadulterated form of participatory democracy.

But not everyone approves. The dusty, Spanish pilgrims who pass through our square, after having walked across Europe from Puerta del Sol in Madrid and Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona, are horrified by what has become of their legacy. They ask us why we spend hours discussing the petty internal problems of the camp. Why do we talk to each other through "the human microphone", when there is no legal impediment to using a real microphone and loudspeakers? How did we get so caught up in the ceremonial aspects of the assembly that we lost sight of its practical purpose?

They are right, of course. The endless discussions of the General Assembly have worn us out and we have been unable to address its shortcomings. It has left us vulnerable to demagoguery and the preservation of the status quo.

Tonight is no exception. The incident on the square is dividing us into two camps – one side favours evicting troublemakers by force if necessary. The other side argues that this undermines the principle of radical inclusiveness on which the movement is based and is a regression into old-style politics. The daily nuisance caused by these troublemakers, replies another, is what keeps us from making any progress in the first place. Both sides entrench their positions and the discussion degenerates into a perpetual to-and-fro.

A girl gingerly proposes setting up a camp court to settle these kinds of issues. Her proposition catches the assembly off guard with its apparent impartiality. But it is too much to digest for one General Assembly. We are tired, and eager to end the meeting. This is when we are at our most malleable.

After a short recess, one of the moderators comes forward. He raises his hands and frames the suggestion as a motion to be granted or denied. "Do we want a tribunal in the camp?" His eyes scan the assembly, assessing the crowd, lingering on familiar faces. Kindred spirits, accomplices? The crowd falls silent and looks back at his pious face. One man in humble service of the many. We wait in suspense.

Smiling gently, forgivingly, the moderator lowers his hands. And it is thus, with a profound sense of release that all thumbs come thundering down, condemning the idea to oblivion. Minutes later, the meeting is over. The crowd disperses and people return to their tents, pleased with having yet again reached a consensus.

However, a minority among us has misgivings about the smoothness with which this outcome was orchestrated. An idea was left unexplored. Sacrificed in order to preserve a false sense of harmony, while leaving the real conflict at an impasse.

The candle on the table casts restless shadows on the interior of the Artists' Tent, as if to reflect the inner disquiet of those gathered around it. Is this to be the fate of all that is new and unknown to the movement? What about our own radical aspirations? Up until now, we have been sitting in the tent, reading critical theory, smugly rejecting the dichotomy between thought and action. Is our presence here, at the edge of the camp, only tolerated because we aren't in the way?

It is time to put this to the test by unravelling the thread of unity that empowered us to boldly speak as "we". Even if it means defying the consensus-driven dynamic of the General Assembly.

By daybreak, the table in the tent, after having served as a communal desk, kitchen, library and bed, had found a new purpose. Over the course of the following weeks, everyone on the square is invited to take a seat at our table. One by one, they sit down in front of a microphone, facing a delegation of four of us. Two camcorders silently recording both sides of the table.

Who are you?

Why did you join the camp?

What role do you play here?

The interrogations start out as a mischievous little conspiracy. It's a power game, and the inquisitors play their part with relish. Despite initial misgivings about introducing a new kind of hierarchy in the camp, there is hardly anyone who declines our invitation to be cross-examined.

Perhaps that is because the distinction, as exemplified by the large chip-wood tabletop that separates the interrogators from the witnesses, is experienced as a formality, a ceremonial division that serves the purpose of the ad hoc tribunal that has been convened. After all, we have all been living together as equals in the camp so far, and there is no reason for anyone to be suspicious of our intentions. Or, it may have been because each individual who is heard by the committee is granted a full hour to tell his or her side of the story. Never before has anyone in the camp been listened to so intently. The hearings take on a confessional quality, and there is almost no need to steer the conversations towards the problems that seem to divide us, as deep-seated tensions and frustrations continually boiled to the surface.

Last night I walked away from a situation with tears in my eyes. I had to call the police because certain people from our camp threw others to the ground, kicking them while they were down. Later today, I want to approach these people together with everyone who saw it and say "Guys, this is beyond unacceptable. We, as a group, can't look you in the eyes any more. We, as a group, can't breathe the same air with you on this square. We hope you understand that you are going to have to leave." I can't say "You have to go." But the group can make it clear that they are no longer accepted here.

Why did you call the police last night? Aren't these issues that should be resolved inside the camp? Are there limits to the self-regulation on the square?

If I had been standing there last night with ten or twenty like-minded people, I would have stepped in. But there were only a few of us. I'm a pacifist myself. I would never use force against anyone. So, the only way I can stop violence is by standing between them with a larger group of people. By keeping them apart. But not by taking the upper hand physically. In that sense, when our numbers are limited we depend on the police to play a role I can't take on myself. I'm not sure if I can justify calling the police, because they do use violence. But I also can't accept... It's a dilemma for me; I'm not sure where I stand. In principle, I think that as a camp we should settle this ourselves. I just wonder whether we're always able to.

The camp continued to struggle with the moral ambiguities of maintaining relations with the social order outside, especially after Amsterdam's mayor issues an ultimatum for us to vacate the square. It introduces a cruel twist to the already confusing quarrels over who does or does not belong to the movement. Who wants to resist; who wants to comply?

Back inside the Artists' Tent, we are not really in any position to provide answers. So, we decided to pick up the pace of the hearings, as if to dispel the air of finality that has come over the camp. We hold four, five sessions per day, exhausting ourselves, desperate to include a majority of voices, angles and testimonials. We interview gentle idealists, hard-nosed rebels, derogatory journalists, salacious bums and sinister thugs.

By the time we hear the footsteps of the riot police outside, there is almost no one left to evict. Our tent and one other are the only two left standing. Occupy Amsterdam has dismantled itself. Even the big, white circus tent has been taken down, collapsing on the pavement like a wounded prehistoric beast. The scattered remains of the camp are swept into a pile on the edge of the square. We pause and listen to the garbage truck's mechanical claw crushing the carbon fibre poles that served as the framework for our fragile little colony.

A policeman peeks in from the outside tumult, interrupting our hearing in session. He hesitates, visibly intimidated by the ceremony that is taking place around the table, and the presence of two cameras in the back of the tent. Someone steps up to negotiate and the policeman gives us until four o'clock that afternoon to wrap up.

This confrontation between our law and their law lasts only about a minute. But it marks the turning point of when this whole venture, with the slow and reluctant inevitability of an ancient planet rotating around its axis, enters a new phase. Its fate, as with any project with revolutionary aspirations, will depend as much on a commitment to write its history, as it once depended on a desire to change the future.

The evening has come down on the empty square with a miserable drizzling rain. The Artists' Tent lies at our feet, provisionally rolled into a soaking mummy. An inadequate life-raft that will not hold us together for long. We heave it onto our shoulders and make our way, like solemn pallbearers, through the self-absorbed and unaware crowds on the shopping streets of Amsterdam.

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Iratxe Jaio & Klaas van Gorkum are artists. They have worked together since 2001, producing performances, videos, publications and installations. Using documentation as their work methodology, they analyse and question social and political issues concerning the everyday. Their work is often said to be political, as it brings to the surface contradictions and conflicts that may exist between individual and collective experience. In 2010 they wrote a monthly article reflecting on the relationship between art and politics for Mugalari, the cultural supplement of the Basque newspaper Gara. A selection of these texts can be read online at www.postpolitikak.org.

Tags

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