A Grotesque Situation
My Response to Steven ten Thije

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Camiel van Winkel responds to Steven ten Thije as part of their discussion regarding Van Winkel's essay "The Sandwich Will Not Go Away Or Why Paradigm Shifts Are Wishful Thinking" on the state of contemporary art discourse. Van Winkel here argues that Ten Thije never actually addresses the content of his essay, and then pretends that it is about artistic autonomy. Look for Ten Thije's concluding reaction *[www.onlineopen.org/meta-theory-minus-a-dialectical-bite]*to be published here soon.

At the end of his response to my essay, Steven ten Thije voluntarily joins the ranks of prophets and evangelists, exposing himself as a *poputchik*. *Ich bin ein Belieber*! I grant him his revelations, but I object to his distorted reading of the argument I present in "The Sandwich Will Not Go Away". Over the past 15 years, I have published a number of books and essays in which I dialectically connect contemporary art to developments in culture, politics, and the economy, but still Ten Thije finds it justified to bring up the reproach of an "ivory tower" attitude – the mother of all clichés. One would almost suspect him of wilful misrepresentation. In his response to my essay, he hardly addresses the main points of the text. His extrapolations of my position are completely unfounded.

It appears that for Ten Thije "change" equals "paradigm shift". His message seems to be that, since changes in culture and society are possible, it is justified to talk about paradigm shifts. Of course, this is precisely the construction that I criticise in my essay. Moreover, I offer an alternative model for change. Ten Thije completely overlooks this point. He suggests that I think change is impossible or nonexistent. In fact, my essay is about the nature of change in the discursive context of contemporary art. I explicitly present a layered model and a gradual, complex notion of change as an alternative to radical rupture and revolution. In my sandwich-shaped model, each consecutive layer deposits itself on top of the older layers instead of simply replacing or obliterating them. The elements of the three layers – the romantic cult of the artist, the post-structuralist implosion of the subject, and the proliferation of meaning in cultural studies – have all remained active in the discourse of contemporary art, which, as a result, is hybrid and often self-contradictory. I see this schematic triple-decker as an analytical tool that may be applied (and possibly further developed) in order to make sense of the current art world discourse, which is often criticised for being unnecessarily obscure. In fact, certain absurdities and inconsistencies in the discourse may be explained when viewed through the prism of my model. It is unfortunate that Ten Thije doesn't acknowledge this. Instead, he comes up with a schoolmasterly lesson about the global effects of neoliberal policies as they relate to the shifts in relations between art and public values. I wish I didn't need to remind him of my book *Moderne leegte. Over kunst en openbaarheid* (1999), in which I already covered many of these developments.

The sandwich of academic-artistic discourse is *not* the product of a handful of evil curators, as Ten Thije has me believing. On the contrary: everyone who is active in the field, including him and me, contributes to the discourse. It is not some alien entity that was forced upon us. The current state of the discourse is the cumulative outcome of many voices, movements and impulses that have arisen in both the present and the past. Within this discursive cloud, specific currents and trends can be specified, and I have identified one that I believe deserves critical scrutiny. Does Ten Thije agree with me or not? The length of his response seems to be the consequence of an exhaustive attempt to avoid the question. His readers may come to the conclusion that he does not want to bother the "personality-based curator" with any undue criticism, because this "new art professional" is "best equipped to facilitate [the] new demand" of the globalised art world we now live in.

He produces a lot of smoke by insisting that I am creating a polarity that pits an art that is autonomous against an art that is not – or, more concretely, between the art of the 1960s–70s and the art of today. A neutral reader can quickly see that my essay is not about autonomy at all – I use the word only twice in the entire essay. It is not even about art itself, but about its discourse. Of course, any changes in the discourse will have their effect on the art subsequently produced (and the reverse is also true). In any case, I don't believe that contemporary art is somehow less autonomous than the art that was made 50 years ago. What has changed, and will continue to change, is the social and cultural context of artistic production, which, among other things, includes a need to reconsider the definition of autonomy and to release it from its prison of tired clichés. In several recent publications, such as my discussion with Anna Tilroe in *Metropolis M* (December 2012), I have offered my thoughts on just such a reconsideration. One important element that we need to overcome is the standard binary opposition between autonomy and political commitment (or social relevance). This opposition, which dates from the 1970s, seems to have survived as a relic in the minds of Ten Thije and his allies.

Instead of lamenting the loss of artistic autonomy, my text proposes something quite different. Over the past few decades, the discourse of contemporary art has become increasingly academic. In my essay, I connect this trend to the legacy of cultural studies. It is now perfectly acceptable – and even a sign of intellectual acuity – for art historians and other academic scholars to publish articles and books on contemporary art (this phenomenon barely existed prior to the 1980s.) I don't have any problem with this – in fact I am an example of this tendency myself. What *does* disturb me is the increasingly academic nature of the discourse produced. Critical notions from the 1960s and 70s have returned in an ultramannerist form; we are faced with the increasing dominance of a type of text production that is opportunistic, fundamentally uncritical, and mostly aimed at canonisation, legitimation and self-promotion.

It was in this context that I used the term "marginal" that Ten Thije makes so much fuss about. It is not difficult to see how the academisation of critical discourse since the 1980s has accorded increased social status to the cultural critic or writer, who, as a result, now occupies a less marginal position than in the past. This is a neutral observation, not an expression of nostalgia and regret. There is no state of "normalcy" that I wish to return to. Instead of making unfounded accusations like this one, Ten Thije could have addressed the actual content of my essay.

"The Sandwich Will Not Go Away" can be read as a response to the grotesque situation in which we find ourselves today. It is an attempt to deal with the discursive inflation that is so painfully illustrated by the curatorial statements I quoted from. But Ten Thije seems to have no feeling for the grotesque. This may have something to do with his position at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, which is currently calling itself the *Museum of Arte Útil* (Museum of Useful Art). The Van Abbemuseum is one of several enclaves in the Dutch institutional art world devoted to a self-declared "progressive" agenda. It is regrettable that representatives of these institutions tend to react so dismissively to any dissenting points

of view. Battling with certain imaginary enemies is one of their characteristic habits. They project their own obsolete idea of autonomy onto a figure they can subsequently call "conservative". But whatever you may think, I'm too young to be Steven's father.

Camiel van Winkel writes on contemporary art and occasionally curates exhibitions. Based in Amsterdam, he teaches art theory and art philosophy at LUCA School of Arts / Sint-Lukas Brussels. He is advisor at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam. He is the author of *Moderne leegte. Over kunst en openbaarheid* (1999), *The Regime of Visibility* (2005) and *The Myth of Artisthood* (2007 / 2013). His latest book, based on his PhD dissertation, is *During the Exhibition the Gallery Will Be Closed. Contemporary Art and the Paradoxes of Conceptualism* (Valiz, 2012).

Crosslinks

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