General

Seen From the Moon We are All Equal

Bik van der Pol

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Artists Bik Van der Pol are currently researching the participatory budget, a very specific and challenging process of democratic deliberation and decision-making that emerged as a form of radical participatory democracy in Brazil.

Maybe some ideas as how to populate those acres you bought on the moon can emerge in Porto Alegre? …

This is how Sofia Hernandes formulated her invitation in a telegram when she asked us to think about making a proposal for the Biennale in Porto Alegre. A telegram … what a crazy thing. It arrived in a red envelope, and looked as if it had come from another world. So out of date, this "written message transmitted through an electrical device and a huge web of wires … that used to be very popular, but now that most people use telephones or email it is much less so". [1] This was the first time we'd ever seen a telegram. Receiving this telegram felt like a leap back in time. The message it contained, could also have been sent from the 1960s when flights to the moon unleashed endless fantasies and speculation. But it could also be pointing to the future when, perhaps, the acquisition of a plot on the moon becomes a normal thing to do.

So far, the moon is free of any claims. Nobody owns the moon and its image belongs to us all. It is available, without exception, to everyone. **Seen from the moon we are all equal.** [2] are all outsiders. We can perhaps even imagine being there or what we would do once we got there. In some ways, the moon is like an artist's studio: empty, yet full of holes, craters, and deep black depths that are waiting to be filled with ideas and thoughts

We are currently researching the *participatory budget*, a very specific and challenging process of democratic deliberation and decision-making that emerged as a form of radical participatory democracy in Brazil. The way in which citizens decide how to allocate parts of their municipal budget was first fully developed in the cities of Pelotas (1983) and Porto Alegre (1989). Our outsider perspective not only allows us a fresh glimpse of the dynamics involved in the participatory budget process; we also have reasons to believe that we can learn from this challenging model and that what we learn we can bring back to our part of the world where this form of participation is present in name only. Here, in the West, we are involved in a decorative form of democracy, full of rules and regulations, in order to accommodate each individual emotion. We are guided by fear and anxiety, and, as a consequence, we have produced a form of 'despotic' bureaucracy, a society of control. This really has to change, and change can be stimulated be by increasing the public space where important decisions are made. This means increasing the number of actors involved in the decision-making processes and accepting the consequences of decisions taken by this large assembly. It is never easy to give up what (one thinks) one has. But, lets, by way of thought experiment, imagine that the moon can be organized and inhabited, and that this can be generated from collective decision-making processes. How to negotiate ideas and thoughts with others, ideas and thoughts that have yet to materialise – or maybe never will, the moon could function as a model to project ideas onto, to speculate freely and without consequences…because negotiations on the current global level do not seem

to work all that well. What kinds of recommendations would this large assembly make based on their experiences of having public agency in this processes of participatory democracy?

We observe that the increased privatisation of public property under current political developments has meant the loss of a meaningful public space. What can we do about this? Danilo Streck ends his essay "The Scale of Participation" with this observation: "the participatory budget is not a ready recipe; it is an open, rich, instigating, provocative process; in the good sense it provokes us to be participants, it provokes us to be protagonists of politics and not anymore the object of the politics of others."[3] Despite all its problems, we consider the principle of the participatory budget a potential model for countering current developments, and an example of how public space can – once established – reveal its political potential. Public space should indeed time and again be or become a space where events "occur" through its daily use and through both chance and organised encounters. This requires a new social contract that "would be an expression of a new way of living together that extrapolates the boundaries of a contract. In the participatory budget it has been shown how solidarity can be fostered when people come together to discuss conditions for their common destiny..." (Streck). Citizens need to be able to take charge and simultaneously be "en garde", alert to how democracy develops and ensure that representatives are also aware. Dialogue is fundamental to the participatory budget process, and is consequently understood as a constant negotiation between citizens. It is also the key to the establishment and articulation of collective space. Dialogue is not necessarily a peaceful process; it will involve risks and uncertainty. But dialogical encounters are essential to society to be, and conditions have to be created to prepare the ground for an encounter to occur. The principle of the participatory budget seems to be such a condition; a space where the dialogue's potential is fully explored and understood as much more than an exchange, namely as a constant negotiation of knowledge between citizens. Nevertheless, we do encounter as many problems as potential. Since the change of government in 2004, less than 50% of the projects proposed in the participatory budget is realized; an increasing number of civil servants represent the government in the public assemblies; leaders in communities are used by the politicians as a 'machine' to gain votes; spaces where assemblies can frequently take place have decreased in number. Participatory budget can work well when it is considered a principle and not a strategy.

Foucault, in one of his last lectures, described the "truth tellers". He considered truth telling as a specific activity, as a role, and he distinguished four modes of truth telling: the prophet (who understands truth as destiny), the sage (who understands truth as being), the teacher-technician (truth as techne) and the parrhesiast (who speaks the truth in his own name and therefore takes a risk). It is especially this last form that is interesting: parrhesia is a figure of speech, meaning "to speak candidly or to ask forgiveness for so speaking". The term is borrowed from the Greek meaning literally "to speak everything" and by extension "to speak freely" or "to speak boldly". It not only implies freedom of speech, but also the obligation to speak the truth for the common good, even if it means at one's own personal risk. [4] We should all become truth tellers and reclaim space as a public and politically charged space while "en passant" bridging the gap between knowledge and emancipation. The concept of "en passant" (in passing) is essential because it is temporal, implies action, learning and the potential emergence of new forms of discourse.

It is a challenge to differentiate the local from the global in an increasingly interconnected and complex world. Meanwhile, actions in one community will affect others. Although many "planetary citizens" fully realise today's complexity, generating change in the realities of individual lives remains a slow process. This is complicated by various intertwined individual interests and long-term views. We need to intensify our activities

and increase the number of actors involved in the process of creating the necessary planetary contract. We also need a model so we can speculate more freely. This model needs to be free of any “real” ownership claims. At the same time, it needs to be “of us all". Once again, the moon as a “tabula rasa”, in the sense of ownership, is an image owned and shared by everyone equally and thus could potentially serve as the location of our imagination where we can re-divide and re-negotiate a world where nothing and everything is at stake. Here we can start exercising and fully activating a participatory process on a global scale, enabling us to eventually implement change to take hold over here.

But perhaps we don’t even really need the moon.

Bik Van der Pol work collectively since 1995. They live and work in Rotterdam (the Netherlands). Bik Van der Pol explore the potential of art to produce and transmit knowledge. Their working method is based on co-operation and research methods activating situations to create platforms for various kinds of communicative activities. Their work has been shown in, amongst others, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Biennials of Lyon and Istanbul, and MoMa,PS1 and Creative Time in New York. They produced projects for public space in, for example, *Beyond Leidsche Rijn* in Utrecht and the *Maasvlakte 2* in Rotterdam. Currently, they are course directors of the Master programme School of Missing Studies, at Sandberg Instituut, Amsterdam. For more information on their projects and publications see: www.bikvanderpol.net.

Footnotes

1. simple.wikipedia.org, accessed May 28, 2013.
2. *Van de maan af gezien zijn we allen even groot*, quote by Dutch writer Multatuli (1820–1887).
3. Danilo R. Streck, "The Scale of Participation: From Municipal Public Budget to Cities", *International Journal of Action Research* 2 (1): 78–97.
4. en.wikipedia.org, accessed 14 April 2013.

Tags

Capitalism, Commons, Democracy, Money

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