

From Emergency to Emergence

Notes on Citizens and Subjects by Aernout Mik

Maria Hlavajova

Essay – January 1, 2007

In 2007, Maria Hlavajova was the curator of the Dutch Pavilion of the Venice Biennale. She worked with visual artist Aernout Mik, who compiled the three-part video-installation *Citizens and Subjects* for the Biennale. ¹ Their collaboration led to a number of reflections on the relationship between art and society, and on terms such as communality and nationalism in relation to Mik's work.

I've mentioned previously that the international project of the Venice Biennale – and here I am, writing as curator of the Dutch contribution to its last edition – likely represents everything that I have always worked against as a curator and a director of an art institution. Faced with this contradiction, I addressed the conflictious terrain of *critical* artistic, curatorial, and theoretical labour vis-à-vis the traditional art sphere on one hand, and on the other, the relation to the neoliberalist currents wherein critical voices are considered mere products to consume. ² The Venice Biennale is traditionally based 'on the very ideas of centrality and dominance on which spectacular, imperial displays were originally founded', ³ and although these principles and the Biennale's authoritarian position have undergone scrutiny through some attendance to other types of practices and discourses, it nevertheless remains an 'exercise of hegemony', as Henri Lefebvre would put it. The dilemma I faced, then, was how to weigh this reality against my belief that if art has a role to play in society, it is to question (and not to participate in) the prevailing consensus about how things are, to question centrality and dominance if you will, and employ art's most powerful tool at hand – imagination – to speculate about how things might be otherwise. Can art that is speculative and propositional find its place within the framework of the current capitalist agenda, materialized in Venice through the spectacle, entertainment and ideology of consumerism on display? And does it at all matter if – and what – art imagines?

Amid these questions, the Venice Biennale itself (historically and by convention a large celebration of 'achievements' in the art of the day – a parade of a world that, despite its global condition, insists on the tradition of national representation) provided an impetus to the project, which became a dynamic study of how one may attempt to address these considerations and introduce a set of beliefs about the possibility of art. As a starting point, I wanted to turn the Biennale's somewhat contradictory form of 'nationalism' into a subject of study, thus acknowledging that the pavilion is not simply a neutral and indifferent exhibition site, but a *national* pavilion. More than discussing the concrete Dutch situation, I was interested in looking at the notion or concept of the nation-state in general and addressing the tensions this brings about in our times.

Artist Aernout Mik's two-channel video installation *Training Ground* (2007) developed independently from these considerations yet engaged a strikingly similar family of concerns about the idea of the nation-state in current conditions. The work was so full of potentialities that it very quickly became a starting point for our collaboration, and a

rousing, vital foundation from which to develop a large multifaceted work. This process not only determined what would be exhibited in the Dutch Pavilion, but rather evolved into a complex undertaking that would later reach out to and activate various artistic, theoretical and institutional fields and forms of thinking about the relationship of art to society, and vice versa. ⁴

Training and Staging

Training Ground depicts policemen 'somewhere in the West' in the midst of a training exercise. The work seemingly reconstructs the procedures of the training, in which participants are taught different strategies of how to protect the citizenry from an influx of illegal immigrants. The 'refugees', 'police' and even 'truck drivers' playing a role in the training are clearly stand-ins hired for the job. In the beginning, the atmosphere is fluid, with the hierarchies of power clearly defined. At some point however, the pace of the training gains a different dynamic, and progressively the distinctions between the protagonists become blurred as the roles they perform no longer correspond to conventions we know: some 'refugees' take over power temporarily; the 'policemen' exercise arrest techniques on each other; and some of the 'drivers' are captured. Some of the 'refugees' and 'policemen' even enter a (seemingly inexplicable) state of trance or delirium, ⁵ while others continue to perform their roles and predictable patterns of behaviour.

It is of particular interest that the method Mik chooses to articulate these concerns is to stage a fictional training or exercise. Per definition, 'training' is the acquisition of knowledge, skills and competencies to establish or improve performance in particular areas. Although aimed at acquiring the ability to perform (and in military or police use, to survive), a training situation is not for real . . . it is just 'as if'. Yet in *Training Ground*, Mik actually goes further; what he stages is not only a training, it is *playing out* a training. Through numerous shifts, the artist distances himself from the representation of what we know as reality. Through infecting the scenes with irrationality, bringing in the idea of spirit possession, and dissolving clear lines between who is who, it soon becomes clear that the work enacts a non-existent situation. Yet the possible scenario that plays out in our minds is precisely what Mik hints at, asking the disturbing question as to how we actually conceive of this world and the power relations that govern it.

In 1994 philosopher Giorgio Agamben wrote a brief study titled 'We Refugees',⁶ expanding on an essay that Hannah Arendt wrote in the early 1940 under the same title. He takes as a starting point Arendt's statement that 'refugees expelled from one country to the next represent the avant-garde of their people', as well as her suggestion that the condition of the refugee or the individual without a country is the paradigm of a new historical consciousness and writes: 'At least until the process of the dissolution of the nation-state and its sovereignty has come to an end, the refugee is the sole category in which it is possible today to perceive the forms and limits of a political community to come. Indeed, it may be that if we want to be equal to the absolutely novel tasks that face us, we will have to abandon without misgivings the basic concepts in which we have represented political subjects up to now (man and citizen with their rights, but also the sovereign people, the worker, etc.) and to reconstruct our political philosophy beginning with this unique figure.' The main message that Agamben articulates is that 'refugees no longer represent individual cases but rather a mass phenomenon' and that the refugee – man *par excellence* – is he or she who needs to be recognized in every citizen: it is only when 'the citizen will have learned to acknowledge the refugee that he himself is, that man's political survival today is imaginable'. That Mik's *Training Ground* and Agamben's 'We Refugees' ask to be read as parallel texts is confirmed by Agamben's remark that, 'single states have proven . . . to be absolutely incapable not only of resolving the problem [of refugees] but also simply of dealing with it adequately. In this way the entire question was transferred into the hands of the police and of humanitarian organizations.'

Now, to complicate matters: in a public lecture given at BAK in 2007,⁷ art theorist Sarat Maharaj engaged in a dispute with Agamben's statement about the refugee as the paradigmatic figure of our age. 'Today,' he said, 'it no longer is the refugee but rather the figure of the terrorist that is emblematic for our times.' While Arendt and Agamben draw on the experience of the twentieth century that is caught in a particular model of migration, of difference, and of the production of consciousness, according to Maharaj, as of today we have largely proven ourselves unable to live with difference, and that is precisely where our position mirrors that of a terrorist. The question if one can at all empathize or identify with the figure of the terrorist in a similar way it is possible with Arendt's and Agamben's refugee will have to remain open for now, yet we can return to Mik's work to see how similar considerations play out in the second piece in the installation *Citizens and Subjects*: the two-channel video *Convergencies* (2007).

Disorder and Confusion

Convergencies consists of edited existing footage Mik collected from commercial media agencies and various other sources. He first attempted to locate documentary footage from situations depicting the training of policemen for dealing with refugees. When consulting the available material, however, he soon changed his mind and had the idea to make training reappear as an element in this work, but within the much larger field that opened before him: the field of preparation for disasters or crises of various kinds. This is when questions of immigration (legal or illegal) began to mingle with issues of terrorism in Mik's work.

In numerous archives, the artist sought out film material that in various ways showed how we, members of Western society, prepare ourselves for the potential dangers to come. The footage originates from different sources such as antiterrorist or riot exercises, as well as from unclear, ambiguous situations from military to police to public transport to detention centres to public parks to schools, and so forth, but mostly spreading from one situation to another so that they become blurred and begin to overlap. Yet Mik selects images just 'before' or 'after' the central account of activity. Their slow pace requires patience, their repetition asks for forbearance. Due to the insistent endurance of these 'non-happenings' or 'non-events', one cannot avoid the realization of how 'normal' this all has become, and that all this is undertaken on our behalf, that is to say, in our name. That becomes even

more apparent when Mik now-and-then smuggles in footage from real situations, situations in which the skills acquired through training and exercise are put into the service of our 'safety'. In these moments, we as viewers seem to have no other option but to watch, perplexed at how far it all went with our (silent) approval. This is a kind of approval we have extended through fear – mainly of immigration and terrorism – and it is readily seized upon in political discourses that perpetuate the very anxiety they claim to combat in the name of our 'protection'. In return, we are presented this state as our inevitable new normal, our new everyday.

All throughout the work *Convergencies*, the architectural element of a 'portocabin', or prefabricated container used for the deportation or detention of illegal refugees, repeatedly reappears; a place – as Agamben has suggested on the subject of the detention centre or camp – where a violent act of stripping, an act of the removal of basic human rights, is performed. In the third work in the Pavilion, the video installation *Mock Up* (2007), Mik brought this particular architectural mainstay of the documentary scene onto a film set. Amid the military exercise landscape of the largest European urban defence training village (located in the north of the Netherlands) – something of a ghost town containing over a hundred 'exercise objects': a school, a bakery, a station, a city council, even recycling bins and telephone booths – Mik constructed a detention centre from prefabricated, furnished container units. This is where a large group of actors – some dressed as detainees, some as guards, policemen, firemen, members of medical teams, and so forth – rehearse time and time again how to evacuate the building in case of fire. What appears as an exercise, or training (again) enfolds through repetition, the drill of the same line of action and customized response to the danger, creating a groove, developing a convention, establishing a habit. It is a process of normalization that Mik enacts, or, in his own words, an 'over-intensification of the same',⁸ so that what appeared exceptional and peculiar before becomes ordinary, customary and even banal.

Yet, this 'excess' of sameness also 'clears the ground for potential difference',⁹ as Mik says. In the particular case of *Mock Up*, approximately half of the cast consists of disobedient youngsters, who at some point discover the ridiculousness of it all and begin to break the rules. They do this first by carefully testing the possibilities, and then by openly disturbing the rehearsal, infecting it with a refusal to comply with the way things are. They move away from routine and towards something more complicated, filling the scenes with the irrational, the foolish, bizarre, spontaneous, some would say irresponsible or risky even; these interventions, which cause implosions, disruptions and confusions, affect – or should I say inspire – the rest of the cast to do the same. As Mik has said about such moments: 'By the virtue of having this excess implode or transgress onto another level, it no longer coincides with the possibilities we know or can rationally account for. In this newly created field there is no other option left for us but to speculate about what else this all could become, and start again.'¹⁰

Yet, if by describing sequences of events I seem to suggest that there is a clear narrative employed in these works, this is only due to the limitations of writing when it comes to art. In fact, we're mostly uncertain as to what we are watching, as Mik's videos unfold rather as disquieting movements 'stripped of the comforting and logic-providing features of narrative, dialogue, and characterization'.¹¹ These works could be described as a flow of inaction, of insignificant images that through repetition, mimesis, re-enactment, ritual and irrational excess gain a disturbing quality that throws reasonable doubt not upon the figures on the screen, but upon ourselves.

In his films, Mik works with large numbers of both professional and amateur actors, who are assigned roles on the performance or film set, but are provided with neither a script nor scenario, nor are they given a possibility to rehearse the scenes. What precedes filming is a presentation of the plan Mik has in mind and a brief discussion about the distinct roles groups of people have – groups that are distinguished mainly by the clothing they are provided with. What strikingly comes to the fore in Mik's work is that there aren't

individuals, but rather, the actors in their groups are presented as 'generic figures' or 'broad social types'¹² signified by dress code, physiognomy and behaviour.

Community Instead of Individuality

One thing to underline in this discussion is a shift that takes place in Mik's work having to do with the individual fading from view, replaced in a sense by the dynamic of a group. As critic and curator Ralph Rugoff has written: 'Mik's work . . . presents images of groups and packs of people, and in some instances, animals as well. None of these mute figures is ever delineated as a distinct character or a psychological subject. Instead, Mik's camera regards them all with a leveling gaze that diminishes and blurs their differences, leaving us to consider the collective identity of those who, under different conditions, might appear as discrete individuals. . . . Everything about his work, in fact – its formal language, temporal structure, and installation strategy – appears to be intimately, if indirectly, connected with the aesthetic character of crowds, in such a way that it reflects back on and addresses the viewer's own status as a member of a multitude. On numerous levels, in other words, Mik's art engages us through the lens of a communal subjectivity – a perspective that most presentations of contemporary art seem calculated to render invisible, if not to obliterate.'¹³

To support this idea of communality – or sociality if you will – let's remind ourselves of the aesthetic means Mik employs: while the documentary material in *Convergencies* is installed off the ground, his fictional works – both *Training Ground* and *Mock Up* – are presented on the floor in almost human scale and in such a way that one feels included, involved even, in the work and thus also directly implicated in the critique that the works make about our world.

The three video works – *Training Ground*, *Convergencies*, and *Mock Up* – are installed next to each other in the Pavilion. However autonomous they are, they revolve around similar issues on an abstract level; according to Mik: 'Embedded in the spatial installation, they together have a capacity to form a continuous loop: a cyclical pattern of fear and violence, constantly feeding each other, but brought to a point where it either exhausts itself or transgresses into other directions.'¹⁴ The 'spatial installation' the artist speaks about is the detention centre he transformed the Pavilion into. The experience of partaking in the world in a 'state of exception', as Agamben calls it, thus begins at the point of entering the building by Gerrit Rietveld, extended as it is through prefabricated and furnished containers. It at once becomes clear that this project is not necessarily about the singularities of issues such as migration, terrorism, or detention, but rather about the complex situation we find ourselves in in the so-called West: it addresses the contemporary world as a place in which the 'detention centre' is no longer a 'mere' device for the production and containment of illegality in the West, but is rather emblematic of the alarming condition we have ensnared ourselves in. The work shows that the logic of domination that functions in the camp de facto operates in other social spaces and that it is really diffused throughout the comprehensive structure of our Western society. Yet, besides articulating a precise analysis of this condition throughout the installation, Mik simultaneously suggests that it is in art where 'subjection' to such conditions can be confronted with (at times joyous) moments of liberation, and where the borders between confinement and freedom are not as fixed as we have to come to believe. Nevertheless, Mik also says: 'It is of utmost importance to me that an art work deepens one's doubt about and within the situation under discussion – especially when entering the realm of the social or the political – and that it by no means offers a false pretence that it "knows" where the problems reside, who is to blame for them, or how to resolve them. What my work does suggest, however, is that solutions *do* exist.'¹⁵

Stimulating Option

If earlier I mentioned my belief in the capacity of art to imagine things otherwise than they are, then what Mik proposes is a more nuanced articulation of this possibility of art in the current democratic-capitalist condition. Contemporary reality is not only marked by the fear touched upon in Mik's works. It is also monopolized by myriad economic, political, and (increasingly) religious interests that barricade public space and silence other voices. Many of those other voices are not prepared or trained to speak; they haven't developed a language, or are simply petrified by disbelief of any probable change. Yet this is not the case in art. And if the field of art is seen by many as a harmless outlet of easily co-opted or even welcome criticism, and oppositional voices are consumed as just another commodity, then, as Mik says, imagining that 'solutions *do* exist' is a modest yet empowering option from which we might begin to counter signs of resignation, disillusion and even cynicism.

Let me clarify: if art 'imagines' it is not that it attempts to be moralistic, perpetuate clichés, or offer clear-cut solutions. This is precisely where the discussions about art that is 'political' and 'engaged' became imprisoned by sheer misunderstanding grounded in a misreading and mechanical application of some philosophical writings touching on these subjects, and a lack of theories developed from close readings of works of art. In a move to open up this ground once more, why not dismiss the terms 'political art' and 'engaged art'? They have polluted our talks and confused our arguments with mistaken and vague interpretations that devalue art, rendering it subservient to, or at best illustrative of, politics. After all, there is no work genuinely free from political bias, as George Orwell put it, and even 'the opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude'.¹⁶

What if we instead take up the proposition of political thinker and theorist Chantal Mouffe and speak about these practices as 'critical art practices',¹⁷ understanding it not as a 'criticism' or 'critique' but as 'criticality' towards the assumed truth about who we are and what our place in the public sphere is. What I mean by criticality is close to what Irit Rogoff has suggested,¹⁸ namely that it means inhabiting a problem rather than analysing it from a distance, and doing so from an unstable ground of actual embeddedness. As there is no position outside of the situation we are critiquing, criticality involves continuous articulation and disclosure, confrontation with the prevailing consensus about the state of things while acknowledging our part in its constitution, as well as tireless efforts to call this consensus – and thus ourselves as well – into question. To return to Mik's work: it is like the manner in which his works explore collectivity or sociality, from staging groups to installing works, such that we the viewers – willingly or not – become the works' (and ergo, consciously also the worlds') participants. The way Mik chooses to undermine the status quo is to contaminate his work with the irrational, undermining the logical foundations of the current system and thus deviating from what appears to be a statement about the level of emergency towards a suggestion of the possibility of change – if we only open ourselves to that possibility. By admitting that we are taking part in the creation of this gruesome picture of the world, we might actually want to alter our attitudes, and if not entirely abandon our disbelief in the possibility of fundamental change and the role of art within it, then at least react by moving in a dialectics between scepticism and idealism. For if, as Homi Bhabha has said, 'In every emergency, there is also an emergence', the chances are not all exhausted.

This text is a shortened and slightly adapted version of Citizens and Subjects, the opening lecture by Maria Hlavajova and Aernout Mik of Citizens and Subjects: Practices and Debates, a series of lectures, seminars, conversations and a master course developed as an extension of the Dutch Pavilion 'back' to the Netherlands and to other sites of 'practices' and 'debates' invested in the urgent task of contributing to a new imaginary about the world. Maria Hlavajova would like to thank artist Aernout Mik and BAK'S curator of publications Jill Winder for their readings of the text.

Maria Hlavajova is artistic director of BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht since 2000. In 2007 she curated the three-part project *Citizens and Subjects* for the Dutch Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale. She has also edited and contributed to a variety of publications on art, theory and curatorial practice. Hlavajova lives and works in Amsterdam and Utrecht.

Footnotes

1. *Citizens and Subjects: Aernout Mik*, a video- and architectural installation in the Dutch Pavilion in Venice, was part of the three-part project *Citizens and Subjects*, the Dutch contribution to the 52nd International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia 2007. The project also included a critical reader – *Citizens and Subjects: The Netherlands, for example* – co-edited by Rosi Braidotti, Charles Esche and myself, as well as *Citizens and Subjects: Practices and Debates*, a series of lectures, seminars, conversations, and a master course at Utrecht University.
2. In lieu of notions of the ‘traditional’ sphere of art – based on the Enlightenment ideals of display of knowledge, power, spectatorship and the bourgeois public – I propose understanding art as a uniquely open field of possibilities *inside* society, in which imaginative speculation, experimentation, and the articulation of alternatives, proposals, and models of ‘what might be’ takes place. Envisioning art in the ‘broadest sense’ of the word, we see a field in which diverse discourses (ethical, cultural, political, social, economic, and so on) intersect and exchange.
3. Bruce Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg and Sandy Nairne, ‘Mapping International Exhibitions,’ in: Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (eds.), *The Manifesta Decade* (Cambridge, MA: Roommade and MIT Press, 2005), 48.
4. One platform was the critical reader *Citizens and Subjects: The Netherlands, for example*, which – unlike Mik’s work in the Dutch Pavilion – takes the state of the Netherlands as an ‘example’ of the contemporary Western condition and engages in thinking about emancipatory political imaginary through contributions by artists, philosophers and social scientists based in the Netherlands. The third part of the project, *Citizens and Subjects: Practices and Debates* was envisioned as an extension of the Dutch Pavilion ‘back’ to the Netherlands in order to provide a forum for other discourses and activities invested in the urgent task of contributing to a new imaginary about the world. The extension, organized by BAK, basis voor actuele kunst in collaboration with Utrecht University, emanated in various directions: not only in time, pace and space, but also towards other (art) institutions engaged with comparable urgencies, such as the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and Witte de With in Rotterdam, but also to Utrecht University and its Studium Generale, and to various fields of knowledge production exploring similar domains of social and political concerns, including history, sociology, religious studies and philosophy. (The lectures and seminars that took place in the context of *Citizens and Subjects: Practices and Debates* are available for viewing in BAK’s video archive: www.bak-utrecht.nl.)
5. Here Mik smuggles in a citation of sorts from a well-known 1950 ethnographic film by Jean Rouch entitled *Les Maitres Fous* (Mad Masters). This anthropological study investigates a concrete case of a response to colonial repression in Africa, pointing to a religious sect, known as the Hauka cult, whose members claim to be possessed by colonial figures of power. In an annual ceremony, the group of men engages in a confrontation with the past by means of re-enactment and mimicking the ways in which they have been treated by the colonizers. The Hauka is known as one of the critical instances of cultural resistance in colonial Africa, and at the same time it is an example that contains a strong critique of modern Europe. Mik’s *Training Ground* rests on similar principles of critique of what we, in a somewhat simplified way, call the ‘West’ by means of bringing to the fore an issue of major social and political consequence today – immigration – acknowledging this issue as a riddle difficult to resolve yet defining for our age.
6. The full text of this essay is available online at: www.egs.edu.
7. A revised transcript of this lecture is forthcoming in *Concerning ‘Knowledge Production’*, part of the BAK Critical Reader series.

8. Aernout Mik and Maria Hlavajova, 'Of Training, Imitation and Fiction', in: Rosi Braidotti, Charles Esche and Maria Hlavajova (eds.), *Citizens and Subjects: The Netherlands, for example* (Utrecht / Zurich: BAK and JRP Ringier, 2007), 36.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 43.
11. Jennifer Fisher and Jim Drobnick, 'Ambient communities and Association Complexes: Aernout Mik's Awry Socialities', in: Aernout Mik and Stephanie Rosenthal (eds.), *Dispersions, Aernout Mik* (Cologne: DuMont Literatur und Kunst Verlag, 2004), 78.
12. Ralph Rugoff, 'A Man of the Crowd,' in: *ibid.*, 76.
13. Ibid.
14. Mik and Hlavajova, 'Of Training, Imitation and Fiction', *op. cit.* (note 8), 40.
15. Ibid., 36.
16. George Orwell, 'why i write', published in various places, for instance: www.george-orwell.org
17. Public lecture within the framework of the *Klartext!* conference, 16 January 2005. Berlin.
18. Irit Rogoff, 'Academy as Potentiality', in: Angelika Nollert, Bart De Baere, Charles Esche, et al. (eds.), *a.c.a.d.e.m.y.* (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2006), 16.

Tags

Art Discourse, Democracy

This text was downloaded on May 16, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/from-emergency-to-emergence