

(In)tolerance

Freedom Of Expression In Art And Culture

Jorinde Seijdel

Editorial – May 1, 2006

No discourse seems more hollow at the present moment than that about tolerance and freedom of expression: in Western culture, and not least the Dutch, enlightened ideas are scarcely capable any longer of generating meanings that apply and appeal to all of us. Through all political groupings, controversies great and small are wreaking havoc on democracy's traditional consensus model and cutting across the public domain. The formal and informal codes, rules, agreements and symbols that determine our freedoms and rights within that domain have ceased to function effectively. One would be tempted to call some of the results cartoonish, were it not for the fact that they have entailed so many real deaths.

Leaving cynicism and nihilism behind, the politico-philosophical concept of the public sphere needs to be articulated anew. The desire for this is projected not just onto politics, but also onto art as the most obvious domain of freedom of expression and symbol formation. Architecture and the city also present themselves as projection screens for experimental ideas about the communal, the heterogeneous and the autonomous.

Open 10 brings together analyses, stances and proposals of theoreticians, artists and designers who examine questions concerning contemporary symbolism and freedom of expression, artistic and otherwise, in relation to the Western notion of tolerance and forms of extremism. The failure of consensus thinking and acting finds expression at various levels. It is no accident that the ideas of philosopher Jacques Rancière – author of *The Politics of Aesthetic: The Distribution of the Sensible* (2004) – concerning the possibilities of a political aesthetic and the perspective of the 'dissensus' are cited with increasing frequency in cultural and art theory discourse. Rancière argues that a true democracy should be founded on a productive 'dissensus', whereby two worlds are located within one and the same world. The radical nature of this proposition appears more stimulating in the present situation than the whiny and exhausted harmony model.

The 'dissensus' possibility does not exclude an appeal to idealism and engagement. In his *Atmosphere* trilogy, Peter Sloterdijk describes how the macro-atmospheres ('Globes'), homogeneous spaces where everyone is equal and secure, are 'frothing away' to nothing. Modern pluralism and individualism give rise to an infinity of foam bubbles, to micro-atmospheres ('Bubbles') that are both connected to and separated from one another. Sloterdijk believes in the positive power of such foam and argues that we must learn to think 'inside out' in order to be able to deal with the increasingly blurred distinction between inside and outside.

In the essay 'Citizens in a Vat of Dye' Sloterdijk examines the premises for a democratic society and the importance to it of written and representational media. The roots of democracy also feature in Tom McCarthy's interview with architect Maurice Nio and artist Paul Perry about their *Amsterdam 2.0* project, which provides a constitutional framework that allows 400 cities to inhabit the same territory and which is based on a system of 'radical tolerance' whereby the citizens of one city are constitutionally prevented from imposing their will on the others.

In their open letter, Lonnie van Brummelen and Siebren de Haan emphasize the importance of a 'reflective interchange' between the institutional interior of art and the 'exterior' where it is installed. *Open* also includes textual and visual excerpts from Van Brummelen's publication *The Formal Trajectory* which recounts the long application process that preceded her *Grossraum* film project.

Roemer van Toorn points to aesthetics as politics in the architecture of Wiel Arets and Rem Koolhaas. Jeroen Boomgaard argues for a radical autonomy in the visual arts in order to free them from the disastrous planning processes of the market economy. Lex ter Braak opposes the call for art to design new symbols for the Netherlands. The column by The Buggers deals with repressive tolerance, while Gijs van Oenen reflects on the souring of Dutch tolerance in the new culture of assertion. Apropos of Paul McCarthy's controversial butt plug gnome sculpture in Rotterdam, Max Bruinsma explores the revenge of the symbols and challenges the artist to step beyond provocation and assume social responsibility. Martijn Engelbregt, known for controversial projects like *Regoned* and *De Dienst*, which push democratic instruments to their limits, produced a special contribution for *Open*. Joke Hermes considers Engelbregt's work from the perspective of her position as lecturer in Public Opinion Formation. Designer Ben Laloua / Didier Pascal contributed a series of drawings in which she interprets the printed media's reporting of a number of current events such as the recent revolt in the French suburbs. Jorinde Seijdel wrote about Koolhaas and Google in China in the light of contemporary notions of censorship.

Jorinde Seijdel is an independent writer, editor and lecturer on subjects concerning art and media in our changing society and the public sphere. She is editor-in-chief of *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain* (formerly known as *Open. Cahier on Art & the Public Domain*). In 2010 she published *De waarde van de amateur* [The Value of the Amateur] (Fonds BKVB, Amsterdam), about the rise of the amateur in digital culture and the notion of amateurism in contemporary art and culture. Currently, she is theory tutor at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and Head of the Studium Generale Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. With *Open!*, she is a partner of the Dutch Art Institute MA Art Praxis in Arnhem.

Tags

Activism, Aesthetics, Democracy, Public Domain, Design

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