

Not a Comfortable Situation to Be In

How Politically Effective is the Work of Martijn Engelbregt?

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Essay – May 1, 2006

Joke Hermes lectures on the formation of public opinion at the InHolland University. The editors of *Open* invited her to write about the political effectiveness of the work of Martijn Engelbregt (www.egbg.nl), an artist who systematically explores the functioning of democracy in his projects. Her conclusion is that popular culture achieves more than art in terms of influencing the free formation of public opinion. For the moment, Engelbregt's work is reserved for political and cultural cognoscenti.

Woe betide anyone who unexpectedly becomes involved in a project by Martijn Engelbregt. You receive a seemingly official questionnaire in your letterbox that asks if you are aware of any illegal aliens in your neighbourhood. Or someone takes a photo of you in a gallery where you yourself are taking photos of other people. You fill in the questionnaire in good faith, even though the questions are somewhat strange. Perhaps you are pleased that the government is at last really tackling the issue of all those foreigners in our country. You arrive at the place where the photos are hanging and you want to see whether you look good. Tough luck! You've been bamboozled. It wasn't the government that asked you to be a snitch. You are made to look a bit of a fool. What's worse, your photo is displayed back-to-front and is only recognizable from the time you walked in. Very funny! First you realize how easily you allow yourself to be drawn into acquiescing with the xenophobic logic that characterizes the immigration policy of our government – and then that you always simply think that everything revolves around you in this world.

The work of Martijn Engelbregt is controversial. Using drastic means he makes us – wittingly or unwittingly – feel how we assent to the control of the state and big business on the pretext of defending freedom and democracy. Though the circulation of quasi-official forms is not exactly the done thing, Engelbregt's intentions speak of a well-nigh excruciating political integrity. In his work, art functions as a bastion against the seduction and corruption of twenty-first-century consumer society. The question is whether art lives up to such a task. Can art be politically effective? Can art projects change how we perceive the world? Do they contribute to the free formation of public opinion?

The response to the question of whether art plays a political role of consequence is simple: sometimes. The Belgian struggle for independence in 1830, according to Wikipedia for example, broke out after a performance of the opera *La Muette de Portici* by Auber. *The deaf-mute* recounts the tale of the Neopolitans who revolted against the Spanish occupiers in the seventeenth century. Legend has it that the people of Brussels, singing *Amour sacré de la patrie*, spilled into the streets and ran riot. Art, or culture, was therefore the direct instigation for the Belgian uprising. Historians like to remind us that the prevailing economic crisis also played an important role, not to mention the exceptionally weak political performance of king William I of the Netherlands.

There are also political decisions that have been cause for symbolic protest, thus lending the protest a cultural overtone. When NATO bombed Belgrade, the small target badges worn by the city's inhabitants on their lapels – as well as by other sympathizers, including foreign journalists – were a form of art as much as a political indictment. The Stars of David that Danish citizens wore en masse during the Second World War, in protest against the Nazi edict that Jews must make their identity known in this manner, frustrated the occupier. This shows that the cultural domain can provide powerful weapons with which to assail the legitimacy and quiet acceptance of (totalitarian) power. The resistance is effective and it is moving, because it takes courage, but primarily because it is borne by people without much power or political say.

That is also why the story of the Belgian uprising is so attractive. *La Muette de Portici* is no longer performed very much. It is must be one heck of a melodrama, described in textbooks as an example of 'National Romanticism'. It was performed in a bona fide theatre and thus in a certain sense deserves the label 'art', but it actually has more in common with the gypsy girl with a tear in the corner of her eye than with abstraction, reflection or alienation – qualities one would sooner attribute to art.

Seduction and Surprise

Culture in the broad sense includes art, but art does not correspond with culture. There is indeed a tradition that champions the political and civic interests of culture. This tradition can be found in 'cultural studies', a branch of scholarship that originated in Britain (not to be confused with 'cultural studies' in the Netherlands that focus more on the management of cultural institutions). The crux of this tradition is its serious consideration of everyday practices as a locus for the creation of meanings. Culture is understood in the broad sense. Art belongs to it, but is equal to Mills and Boon's novels, sentimental operas, burlesque or punk music. The third important element is power. Cultural studies understands culture as a constellation of power differences – class differences, for example, but also differences in sex, ethnicity or age.

From the perspective of cultural studies, Engelbregt's work is primarily of interest to an elite. His work does not connect with the everyday experience of 'ordinary people' (whoever they may be), which is a key precondition for grasping what the world means from their perspective. It does not break a lance for 'lowly' forms of culture but pokes fun at the commercialized practices of cultural institutions and government, and it mocks the all too convenient pinpointing of scapegoats for everything that is wrong with our society. Engelbregt's illegal aliens project is art that does not attempt to promote understanding or thrash out an issue; it is art that indicts. It operates on two levels: it insults people who do not deserve it and subsequently – over their heads, via debate conducted in person and in the media – asks attention for the degeneration of society, for the blinkers that we put on, for how we willingly allow ourselves to be taken in.

Politically effective culture, as in the above examples, gives ordinary people the power to resist. Within cultural studies there is a prevailing view that popular culture is also able to achieve this. 'Fictional rehearsal', for example, is a concept that refers to how we are free to 'rehearse' vital questions following the example of characters in television drama.¹

Soap operas can be included in this category. The genre provides us with 'usable stories', stories or story lines that we can use as a mirror. They provide an opportunity to reflect on who we are and who we want to be. Ordinary television culture is usually not terribly meaningful, but it can serve as an informal teacher.² In the space of about half a century, television has become the medium of all those groups who have little access to art, culture or the education system, without it wholly excluding the more privileged. Television is not a medium that makes or keeps people stupid; it teaches us a great deal about difference and equality. Television introduces viewers to many different worlds and people. We have become 'good neighbours' of groups we would never encounter in the flesh.³ The commercial logic in popular culture seduces us, and from time to time it surprises us in order to keep us in suspense. For example, the first season of *Big Brother* (1999 - 2000), which originated in the Netherlands, unleashed a torrent of discussion, both in the media and on the street, in the football club canteen and on the Internet. Marianne van den Boomen has described how discussions on two 'usenet sites' (nl.actueel.big-brother and alt.nl.tv.big-brother) demonstrate the formation of opinion in action: 'In a stream of about 200 postings a day, people dealt with all the ins and outs of the TV programme *Big Brother* in this forum. Vicious rumours and slanging matches appeared in the newsgroups, but also exceptionally acute psychological analyses of the house's occupants. . . . [I]t is not only great thinkers, men and women of letters, journalists and stars who spur people to think about sense, meaning and morality via the media – "ordinary people" like the *Big Brother* housemates can do that as well. And perhaps more effectively, because they are more recognizable and more accessible. You can mirror yourself in them, measure yourself against them. And that is what people did – they set their own tales of infatuation, divorce, cancer and foster children alongside those of Karin, Sabine, Bart and Willem. And they did not do this in private, in their own minds, but publicly, in open communication with others.'

⁴ Examples like these show that simply condemning commercial culture as a culture for the masses that 'makes them stupid' and 'keeps them stupid' is not an option. They also demonstrate that there is more public and semi-public formulation of opinion than we realize. They show that taking what people do with everyday and popular culture seriously is important and potentially productive. Engelbregt's work, conversely, does not seek points of contact with us as public. It does not attempt to seduce and surprise, nor to validate and alienate. It wants to shake us to our senses. If we were actually living in a nightmare that would be salutary, but that is not the case.

Smirking and Reflecting

Art is tied to profit-driven financiers to a much lesser extent than popular culture. If I descry a political analysis in Engelbregt's work, then that is down to me as a spectator. If I think that Engelbregt is teasing me when I end up in a 'loop' by following an Internet link that looks intriguing (a project he devised for the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant*), then that does not detract from the project's autonomy.⁵ Asking what his work achieves politically is therefore wholly inappropriate. The question about the 'uses' of art is, after all, one that fails to acknowledge the very singularity of art. If Engelbregt's work is politically effective, then that is almost in spite of itself.

Engelbregt wants to conduct research, posit questions and present the results. Forming opinions and greater political awareness are not his primary goal. But does his work achieve that nonetheless? The examples mentioned at the start of this article, in which art and politics mutually reinforce each other, suggest that this is unlikely if you primarily get in people's hair. Anyone who has been the subject of a tirade of abuse from a stand-up comedian, showered in bits of chewed apple sputtered out by a cabaret artist, or has experienced the sound and smell of escaping gas at an avant-garde theatre performance will remember the disapproval, revulsion, shock and fear followed by the liberating laughter, but a broadened world outlook hardly comes into it. Art is politically effective if, besides analysis and critique, it imbues self-confidence and offers a bit of encouragement.

Martijn Engelbregt does not, on my part, need to go and compose any sentimental operas or revolutionary anthems, but if his work were, for example, to reach me via television – and then preferably via drama as the BBC or its Dutch counterpart, the VPRO, like to make it – then I would probably think it was wonderful. Programmes like *Yes, Minister*, *The Office*, or a pseudo-docudrama by the Dutch producer and performer Arjan Ederveen offer a mixture of absurdism and politics that gives pause for thought as well as for smirks (and sometimes grimaces). As befits ‘good’ art, these programmes prompt reflection. At the same time, the viewers sit at a safe distance from the conspiracy. We are the ones who have chosen to watch. The description in the TV guide or the reputation of the programme’s makers means that we knowingly choose to be surprised and wrong-footed. If we are the target of a ‘practical joke’, then that should not surprise us. The following day, a great many of us will talk about the programme with a great deal of emotion.

There is no need for EGBG, the registry research bureau established by Engelbregt, to be like *Candid Camera*, a television programme with a hidden camera from the 1970s and ‘80s, or like some of the scenes in MTV’s more recent *Jackass*. The only issue here is whether something is ‘acceptable’ or ‘beyond the pale’. Participants eating a goldfish from the bowl on the counter at a butcher’s shop (a *Candid Camera* scene) did not, to my recollection, spark a debate about animal rights or about the means employed by shopkeepers in order to increase turnover: ‘A slice of *saucisson*, madam?’ Engelbregt could indeed toy with questions of ‘authenticity’ and ‘truth’ in a manner that invites participation in discussion about the issue itself instead of exclusively about the means used, or – worse still – in a manner that plays people off against each other.

Losing the Plot

In his recent project *de Dienst* (‘the Department’), an Internet-based project to select a work of art for a new annex to the Lower House of Dutch Parliament (see www.de-dienst.nl), he does actually stimulate the forming of opinion. Though I have become a wary visitor, there is something poignant about this project. Anyone in the Netherlands could submit proposals for a work of art and was able to vote for a favourite: democratic art. If I extrapolate the personnel costs, then Engelbregt charged a fee of 320 euros a day for his personal input. After tax, that is less than a cleaner would earn cash in hand. The project has, moreover, already been running much longer than planned, without any increase in the budget; it can hardly be a money-spinner. Once the project is completed, the workspace will be compacted, ‘crushed’ like cars at a scrap yard, and exhibited at chest height on a pole. Discussions are conducted in the web-based forum, about the budget and the highly coincidental ‘election’ of Engelbregt’s own work to the top nine winning entries, among other things. While some people bravely speak their mind, the ensuing reactions reveal how others think that is pretty stupid. We, the Dutch, are clearly not terribly adroit as shapers of public opinion.

Since it is not television but art, I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do with the amateurish photos of artworks and events, with the background colour of the website that looks to me like camouflage green. Whereas with earlier work by Engelbregt I was under the impression that the scales were meant to fall from my eyes, here I lose the plot. Neither the works of art themselves, the slogan of the day or the discussion on the site are very fruitful, which means this work is lacking a clear-cut goal to an even greater extent than his abovementioned work. Credulity and naivety are not rebuked in this domain. Oddly enough, I then actually seem to have a greater liking for the illegal aliens project. There, at least, I knew where I stood: it was about stupid, unsuspecting endorsement of the status quo. It involves the tacit rubber-stamping of the machinations of a state that is restricting more and more freedoms and systematically undermining the democratic aspect of society. In addition, the earlier work allowed me to angrily argue that ‘the unsuspecting’ value their personal worldview – however ignorant – or to state that Engelbregt’s work is art for our own benefit, a complaint against short-sightedness and political inanity. A

complaint that was understood by only a small group of 'the enlightened'.

Incidental Rather than Structural

Can Engelbregt's work be of any use in the formation of public opinion, and in that respect does it function politically? Can his art projects truly reveal something about contemporary society? And if so, is it then also possible to translate it into debate and the formulation of critique, or indeed of a Utopia? Does it make us reflect on what connects us, or indeed divides us? My answer is fairly brief in this respect: it is old-fashioned avant-garde art. Straightforward social analysis is translated into projects that inventively twist and pervert rules and expectations. If the projects do serve as a prod to formulate an opinion, then they are a mental exercise for political and cultural adepts, and – in spite of themselves – they offer the pleasure of self-satisfaction for those who 'get' it. Sometimes I'm a member of this club, for instance if I read in the texts of *de Dienst* how Saskia Noorman (MP for the PvdA, the Dutch labour party) cheerfully announces that there is absolutely no guarantee that the 'elected' artwork will actually be realized; the presidium of the Parliament's Lower Chamber will decide this. A satisfactory answer, it seems to me, to Engelbregt's question of whether art and democracy can go together. If I had still been able to vote, then it would have been for artwork number 5, which bears the slogan 'You are Here for Us' as its title. Even if the people's representatives would probably not understand this as a cutting observation.

Meanwhile, I have bowed to the logic of Engelbregt's work. Yes, it shows how society functions, but even I seem to contribute to the exaggeration of differences between those with cultural capital and those without, which is not what I want to do. Engelbregt extends an explicit invitation to take part in discussion on the website of *de Dienst* and anyone can act as a moderator, but nobody does. The website is an open medium and the discussion on the site suggests it is very open, but the lack of clarity about status and structure means it is not. Increasing the democratic quality of our society is an art in itself. Art proper contributes something to this more incidentally than structurally, especially since all the arts, including that of the formation of opinion and discussion, demands skills that must be cherished and propagated, and we cannot take these skills for granted.

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Footnotes

- 1 . On Stuart Hall's concept of 'fictional rehearsal' in relation to soap opera, see John Mepham, 'The ethics of quality television', in Geoff Mulgan (ed.), *The Question of Quality* (London, BFI Publishing, 1990). See the same essay for Mepham's concept of 'usable stories'.
- 2 . On television as an everyday teacher see John Hartley, *Uses of Television* (London, Routledge, 1999).
- 3 . See John Hartley, op. cit., for his arguments about the knowledge class and the good neighbourliness that television teaches us.
- 4 . Marianne van den Boomen, *Leven op het Net: De sociale betekenis van virtuele gemeenschappen* [Life on the Net: The social significance of virtual communities] (Amsterdam, Instituut voor Publiek en Politiek/Dutch Centre for Political Participation, 2000), 26 - 27 , see www.xs4all.nl (date of access: December 2005).
- 5 . Other people had more patience with *de Volkskrant* link and could see how long the other visitors had waited and how long it took before they reacted.

Tags

Activism, Art Discourse, Democracy, Public Domain

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