

Platform BK - Reader

It's very political

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**Engagement
in art**

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Engaged Art: The world isn't listening

Hans Den Hartog Jager

On September 18 of this year the NRC newspaper published an article by Hans den Hartog Jager and his views on the current affairs in the art world. In the introduction he prompts that today's engaged art is predictable and leftist in a naïve, cliché-driven and singular manner. The critical stance of artists and curators has turned into a ritualistic dance.

Hans den Hartog Jager (HdHJ) commences his probe with the listing of several socially engaged exhibitions that are currently opening up throughout the country; calling on van Abbemuseums' Positions, an exhibition by Charles Esche with works by Charles van Otterdijk, Celine Condorelli and Bouchra Khalili that asks its audience to 'think about the means by which societal power is acquired or bestowed'. Further summing Het Domein in Sittard and their survey of The Yes Man, an American duo that through a humoristic application fights against capitalism in the world and arts. At the SMBA in Amsterdam Uli Westpahl built an alternative tomato nursery aiming to challenge the perception of the standardized tomato. And not least at BAK in Utrecht (a discursive space for dialogue between art, knowledge and engagement) a new episode of Jonas Staals New World Embassy premieres, in which representatives of 'resistance organizations' from all over the globe are brought together. HdHJ argues that he understands the engagement, "the world is on fire and artists too are genuinely and empathetically involved with the crashed flight in Eastern Ukraine, the decennial battle between the Israelites and Palestinians. Through their work they can employ their concerns and engagement. Yet, HdHJ reveals a conundrum: what these artists do hardly has an impact - the world does not listen. The reason for this is clear: society realizes that the artists' engagement is very well just a second rate engagement, because their engagement is always in service of their art. Besides, HdHJ continues, you could argue the same when critiquing engaged writers, thinkers, politicians and ngo-employees. They too are enlightened by their work and some even earn their bread and butter through their engagement; "So why wouldn't artist be permitted to show their engagement through their art?" HdHJ questions. Aside several reasons a rather fundamental one is that engaged artists, curators, critics, museum employees barely understand the role their work employs in today's society. And that role, according to HdHJ, is quite clear: "Of art one can expect new, unfamiliar images, insights, ideas and emotions that aren't able to find place in the other societal pillars. Good art mediates novelty, disarrangement and unpredictability, beauty and surprise - attributes that are still largely found in the work of the 'normal' artists. Actually, engaged art could very well provide these attributes but has refrained from doing so for a number of years now."

Angle

Firstly, engaged artists barely know how to make plausible that engagement should find its conception in the arts as the majority of engaged art operates in areas where society already caters for itself (there is to say the least an abundance of politicians, charitable incentives and ngo's) and why most people rarely understand the artistic angle and what it aims to contribute. HdHJ wonders that if one is truly engaged, why make art, why not be an activist or a politician?

Then, what makes it worse is the fact that for the past decennia political or engaged art lost the

foremost important criteria of art that makes art art: novelty and elusiveness. Engaged art is painfully predictable, especially from an ideological point of view she is always, always 'left'. Against the reigning powers and for the individual, against violence and for the Palestinians (except the one off Israelite of course). Against the market, 'neo-liberalism' and capitalism. Protagonists for the refugee and the stateless. Against factories, for the micro producer. Society's engaged art isn't necessarily left, she is leftist in a naïve, cliché-driven and singular manner with which, for the past fifteen years, one cannot interest the political arena, apart from the dazed spirit found at the deep ends of Groen-Links. For engaged art this is their normative, yet, they seem to be oddly blinded for this mechanism. Where they are generally critical towards the rigid forms of a world view (i.e. realist art and craftsmanship) it seems that no one dares to challenge the leftist and the prosperity of art. The prevailing reason for this, and perhaps the biggest problem of today's art world, and which is the root of the current system is a Romanticism that dates back a great two hundred years. Up until that moment artists serviced society: artists made what the church, the sovereign, the bourgeoisie expected from them. Romance broke that down: they were convinced that artists no longer had to serve, but that their individuality, their unique persona, needed to be regarded as the differentiator for their artistry. Every artistic oeuvre became ones' personal universe that was under reigns of the Holy artist who determined its laws and ruling and had now relieved itself from any societal expectation. From the Romantic era onwards art became synonym to freedom - free of form, ideas, and expression. Meanwhile that freedom could only exist because of the tacit agreement with society: to come to new ideas artists were permitted more freedom than regular people - they had artistic freedom. But in return for that freedom they were exempted from societal influence. Whatever artists did or experimented society didn't mind much, as long as it didn't infringe with quotidian politics and had took a role in debates. That was the price of freedom. And it worked. From the mid-nineteen century until well in the eighties in the twentieth century artists pushed societies boundaries at its merits, releasing new forms, ideas, emotions into the world and society accepted this. The result however is that the art world started to believe that she was the synonym of new, progress and art, in short, became 'left'. Initially it occurred this way by accident, a by-product of the artistic freedom, however post the twenties engaged art was innately associated with left.

Autonomy

Times and things change and currently left is no longer the norm, neither is the autonomous artist. And in these circumstances the deeply entrenched combination of singular 'leftist', self-centrism and world-alien view of engaged art has become its own worst enemy. Engaged artists still behave with an artistic free air that is impermeable all the while their ideologies are so predictable, artistically uninteresting and undermines their claim for autonomy and freedom. And that is the problem and it is becoming ever more scrutinized by society since the dissemination of the avant-gardes and doubt is rising, questioning whether art can sustain a seminal feeding ground for new ideas and refreshing forms. It is not for no reason that politicians and subsidizing funds are ring-fencing artistic autonomy as its becoming more common that one hears of commercial companies delivering new ideas - and willing to be pliable to society's norm. Why does the art need an exempted position? Why should society provide the arts with money and autonomy? It is these deliberations that made the protests against the budget cuts a few years ago so awkward. They did not only confirm that the art world had completely lost its position within society, it kept feeding the notion that the beloved artistic autonomy for a majority of artists became a means to claim money.

The oddity with artists like Hito Steyerl, Jonas Staal or Jeanne van Heeswijk and ditto curators Charles Esche, Maria Hlavajova or Jelle Bouwhuis is that, however heavily they concern themselves with society's developments, they hardly recognize this elementary problem to say the least think it's something for them to worth deliberating. HdHJ wonders, "Are they truly that naïve that they undermine their own 'engagement' is an integral part of the carousel of art production, funding and museum exhibitions? That their alleged criticality is no more than a ritualistic dance, performed in a protected reserve, and that its increased understanding is widely perceived as exotic? That maybe in the time of those cuts, painfully and triumphantly presented by politicians in the Netherlands and in Europe, that could have been the opportune moment to establish a new relatedness with society?". Maybe worse is the current rise of singular engaged art that digs at the plausibility of art as a whole. 'Engaged' artists like Jonas Staal and curators as Charles Esche only confirm the view of a self-centred art world that is unable to be self-critical. They don't seems to understand that there is another ideological battle that could be battled: if they truly want to influence society they should first solidify their own ideological fundament. And instead of prescribing politicians, collecting air miles as they travel across the globe building up exhibitions or supporting resistance organisations in Mali, the Staals and Steyerls, the Esches and the Hlavajova's should be critical towards their functioning and scrutinize the role of engagement in the art world - 'starting with the man in the mirror' to reference the great engaged artist Michael Jackson. Let them build up new Trojan horses if they really want to bring change, look at the intelligent and provocative doing of Renzo Martens or Yael Batana - artists who aren't as coherent but know how to be enticing. HdHJ closes, "But as an artist you could try to seduce the art market by undermining oneself (hitherto 'right' artists as Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst are remarkably successful and through which they have more societal impact then all the 'left' artists amalgamated), go underground or look for inspiration in cultures that haven't separated art and society as much - the one thing that Staal does well, in Mali. This is the crux: artists and curators who actually want to be engaged, they will have to take ensure arts new role in society. Only then can she have the authority to show society an alternative. Save the art and then the world - be creative, build a horse, or drum up a new Romanticism. The art has that freedom, for now."

A week later, 25 September, responses to the above article followed:

Look at art outside the large museums

HdHJ claims that engaged art may never activate something in society, because she is encapsulated inside the art world. 'Engaged' is a term used by historians and critics to categorize the ungraspable art. It is a challenge to describe when one doesn't have those words. However, the art of someone like Hito Steyerl, mentioned by HdHJ, is far too complex to reduce it to one term. HdHJ should weigh in his own bosom and question what art criticism can purposefully contribute when thinking about art, and especially: in offering an entry point to art that isn't displayed in the large museums and fairs. Critics could open up the vantage point of the art world. They have the opportunity to do so. The art critics themselves have stepped into the presupposed trap that they think they can only write on large-scale, successful exhibitions. How engaged can she be? She herself could develop a new critical language and take on an adventure. Or is it too late? "The art has that freedom", he states. The art critics maybe no longer.

Florette Dijkstra

Den Hartog Jager and his 'right' ideology

The article on engaged art by HdHJ is charged with 'right' ideology. Engaged art is, according to him always predictable because it is 'left': against the market, the neo-liberalism and capitalism. He tacitly suggests that art is only novel when she is critical toward the market, the neo-liberalism and capital. To these, and by large, erroneous thinking has occurred. Holding on to a socio-critical stance is neither dated nor 'left'. Identification a criticality on society with 'left' undermines other critical stances. That one cannot be critical toward society says something about the society.

If HdHJ exclusively binds 'artistic freedom' with Romanticism and engaged art he forces serious harm to logics. An impermeable autonomy and artistic freedom would lead to predictability. A commercialized stance would not only be predictable but would understand what role it fulfils within society. 'Engaged' artists are stigmatized 'world-alien'. But that 'world-alien view' of the human brings opportunity to take a step back from the existing production and consumption machine and artistic criticality, which is needed ever more, is dubbed 'naïve' and 'foolish'. Criticality on market is a thorn in the eyes of the 'right' politicians and subsidy funds and that they are ring-fencing the artistic autonomy doesn't surprise me. The alternative 'right' that HdHJ proposes is predictable, naïve and foolish. To subordinate artists to the laws o the market confirms the totalitarian assertion.

Dr Henk Smeijsters, Heerlen (Author of 'Happy with less')

Who criticizes the critics?

The art critic has power. Especially when writing for a newspaper. He or she can name or shame a cultural producer or institution. This power comes with responsibility. And some things aren't done by an art critic. You cannot impose cultural producers to change their political preferences. HdHJ complains about artists who 'don't willingly comply with societies norms' like commercial companies do. He argues: "if they [artists] truly want to influence society they should first solidify their own ideological fundament". This type of criticality is suitable for countries as Russia, but not the Netherlands as here it looks impeded. The task of the art critic is to judge qualitatively and not to measure it against the political halyard. As an art critic you can't burn down the work of cultural producers without screening the work. Artists and curators like Hito Steyerl, Jonas Staal, Charles Esche, Maria Hlavajova and Jelle Bouwhuis are placed in the in the spanking bench as representatives of the naïve left engagement. The critique, however, isn't supported through a referencing of their work. Art critics cannot criticize the work of cultural producers just because they are part of a system that they seem to be criticizing. That's an unfair critique. Cultural producers need to pay their rents and are by default dependent on institutions like the government, cultural funding or the market. All of this raises the question: Who criticizes the critics? Artists and cultural producers are continuously scrutinized and judged. Critics however, are permitted to review poorly and do so without any consequences.

Who provides critical art a platform?

HdHJ notes that critical art has transformed into a ritualistic dance and presupposes that it will not have a critical effect. He criticizes curators Charles Esche, Jelle Bouwhuis and Maria Hlavajova and artist Jonas Staal. In the same article he mentions myself alongside Yael Bartana as artists that are capable of producing interesting work. And because of this mention I felt obliged to respond. A group of artists, among them Ahmet Ohgut, Nicoline van Harskamp and Sara van der Heide, all three from the Netherlands recently threatened to boycott the Sydney biennale because their prime sponsor was Transfield, an Australian conglomerate that monetizes on the camps for refugees. In those camps human rights are severely deprived. And artists did not want to associate themselves with that. The boycott erupted and Transfield withdrew their sponsorship. That was a major achievement and resulted in a biennial that was equally disposed in relation to the economy it is part of. I did decide to show my work Episode 3 - Enjoy Poverty. Not despite the Transfield sponsorship, but because of it. The work shows the current situation - a young white artist taking on the war and capitalism without it making much impact. And even if the biennial was fully sponsored by the kind-spirited companies in the world; without the economic segregation that Transfield sustains, non of the invited artists could have been flown out to Australia. And so, I do think HdHJ has a point: Its too late simply criticize the world. The critique provides the public with a sensationalist sense of being on the right side of history without it costing them, because it doesn't require the mental attention span to situate themselves inside the criticized reality. Those who are paying are the billions of people who do want something to change in the world, but generally are unable to penetrate further than to take the role of an extra in an arts project. Far more interesting is art that understands her own position, who doesn't turn tables centred around itself and challenges the world to be reinterpreted. Also in his recent book *Het Streven* (ed. trans. *The Pursuance*) HdHJ elaborates on my practice as a case study that wishes to break from its banks. This too enticed me to dot the i's. In his article HdHJ commits a crucial error: there is need for a space in which these questions are asked. And in the Netherlands, it is that space that is being sustained by those curators who HdHJ criticizes. Maria Hlavajova was the first to show my work in an art centre. Jelle Bouwhuis curated a solo show for the screening of my Episode 3 work when no one had a desire for it. And without the support of Charles Esche and Bouwhuis (maybe one or two more) I can pack up and go. Then I would have to start with painting paintings for galleries - art that HdHJ and I despise. Art that can not surpass the system in which it has been created. Dear Hans, please do not confuse critique with the depriving of space that provides criticality. Esche and Bouwhuis create just that.

The world changes the artists

Hans Den Hartog Jager

Curator Jelle Bouwhuis was criticized by Hans den Hartog de Jager in his essays on 'leftist' art. According to Bouwhuis engaged artists are everything but naïve, they are exactly at the heart of life.

From the high mountain a man views the misty meadow below him. It is a known portraiture from the Romantic times, some two hundred years ago. Religion, industrialization, feudalism, class society, monarchy and democratization were meshed together. With Sturm und Drang our lonely visionary explained the changing world in easy polarities like Romance and Rationalism, progress and standstill, avant-garde and academic, left and right, autonomous and engaged. But that system is profusely disrupted. From the times that the broader audience has come to accept contemporary art, around 1970, cracks have become apparent in the polarized world image. After the fall of the Berlin wall and a later following tsunami of global financial capitalism, we are sure: es war einmal.

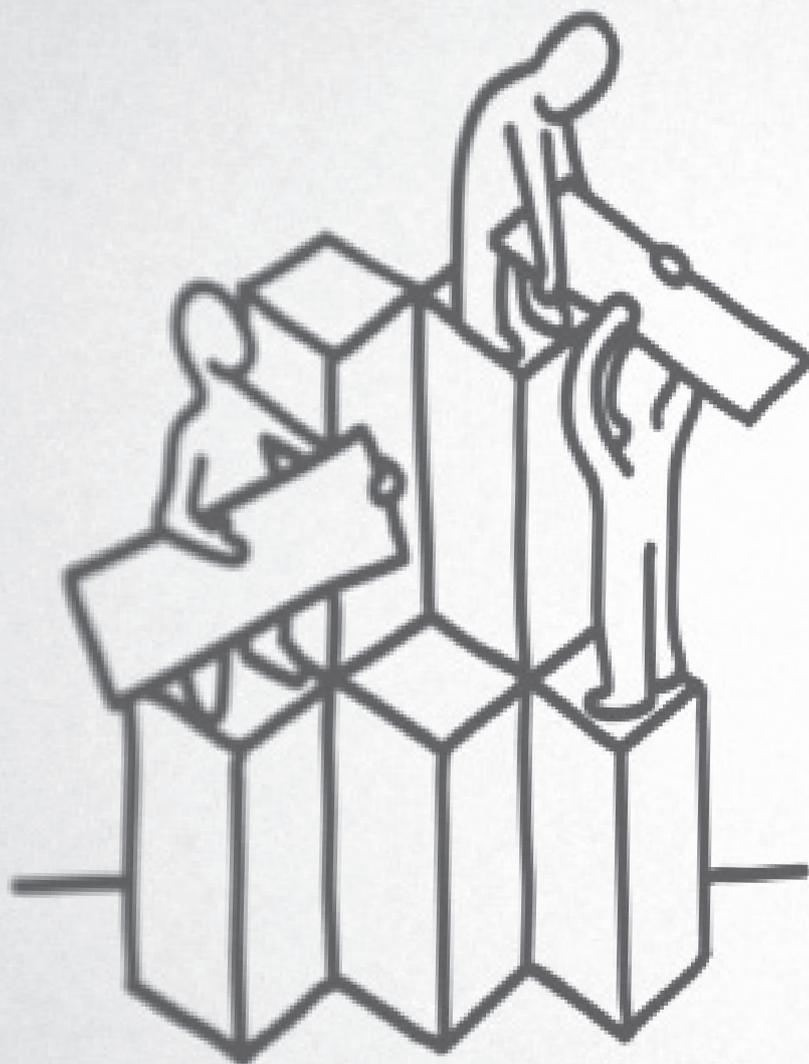
The old oppositions no longer function. Those who worry about ecological queries, (bio) diversity, food production, world immigration or the increasing income disparity are cut short in their bargain. And so, time has come to descend from that mountaintop and level ourselves to the society we are part of. Lets call that 'engagement', or being involved. Artists like Yael Bartana, Renzo Martens, Uli Westphal and Jonas Staal (all who were mentioned by Den Hartog Jager) are visionaries, but no longer the lonesome artist-geniuses as we know them from our traditional art history. They are at the heart of society and are depended on those that support them, like the funds, critics, art institutions and curators. And through this they can challenge the complex reality of our society today.

At the presentation of the New World Embassy of artist Jonas Staal, now in Utrecht at BAK, I saw the interest from the art world, as well as the politicians, journalists, interest groups and ngo's. They learned right there and then that Azawad is not just a Malines problem but that it is an opportunity for perpetually marginalized societies and that militant missions are perhaps less useful than a referendum on autonomy as recently held in Scotland. Because of the involvement of BAK and Staal, Aazawad appears to have face, in a way the artist can portray and position an issue that acts as a counter weight for the lethargy that generally comes into play with African issues.

Another example is the tomato nursery with sixty different variances of the tomato that German artist Uli Westphal installed this summer at Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam (SMBA). The work responded to the standardized availability of the round, red and watery tomatoes in the agriculture and supermarket by counter-proposing a diversified set through different forms, colours and flavours. If one wished, they [visitors] could extract the tomato seeds and produce their own, thus increasing the diversity of tomatoes. Hence the exhibition audience was an amalgamation of gardeners and gallery visitors, whose interests came together in complex perceptions of aesthetic (form-) and ethical (production-) questions instigated by an apparently meaningless tomato.

It's quite the challenge to comprehend the new synergies between art and society from that lonely mountaintop. You will have to participate. The engaged artist and curator have a solid foot on the ground, and sometimes literally get stuck in the mud. But when will the critic descend from his rock?

illustration: Studio Inherent



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Word ook lid: https://platformbk.banster.nl/vereniging/lid_worden

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