

## **The Argument for Autonomy: The Missing Link in the Discursive Arena**

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As in many other countries the arts in the Netherlands are under attack. They are facing not only outrageous budget cuts from the government, but also increasing hostility in public discourse. Spending public money on art is no longer considered self-evidently justifiable. And although the government has not gone as far as to eliminate all spending on culture, it has radically redefined the conditions under which artists and cultural institutions can qualify to receive funding. These conditions are drenched in the neoliberal market ideology. The message of the state is clear: the arts are part of the market system and have to operate according to its rules. The value of art in general is not denied, but expressed solely in economic terms. Art is not accepted as an autonomous domain, a distinctive field of knowledge production that is valuable as such and worth protecting. Autonomy no longer seems to be a valid argument in the Dutch debate about art. For some, as I will show, this has come as a bitter surprise. However, as I will argue, it is mainly the field of art itself that has contributed to the disappearance of autonomy as a useful tool of argumentation in the discursive arena.

### **The Motherland of Liberalisms**

In a recent article responding to the austerity measures that are affecting culture across Europe, German theatre maker Alex Karschnia, who, together with his performance group andcompany&Co resided in the Netherlands for many years, described my country as “the motherland of liberalisms”. The qualification can be linked to a mix of popular images that trigger envy in some and repulsion in others: scarcely clothed gays parading on boats through the canals of our capital city; legal soft drugs on every corner; immigrants welcomed with open arms, provided with housing and education; healthcare and education available for everyone; people dying whenever they choose to with help of their doctors; autonomous art supported without any state meddling, no matter how experimental or avant-garde.

In this context, Karschnia describes the Dutch theatre landscape with a considerable note of envy:

generously supported by the state, comprising not only big, representative houses, but also a vast network of independent ensembles, post-academic training facilities, and free production venues where young and innovative artists can independently pursue their work. As Karschnia emphasises, in Germany and elsewhere in Europe independent artists may only dream of such a state of affairs. Karschnia rightly traces the origins of this “miracle of Dutch theatre” back to 1969 when a group of young theatre makers began expressing their discontent in public, with the artistic quality as well as hierarchical structure of the heavily subsidised state theatres.

The protest – Aktie Tomaat – was named after the now famous “tomato throwing incident” of 9 October 1969, when a couple of student actors deliberately disturbed a performance of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* by the Dutch Comedy. This incident launched a series of debates about the state of theatre in the Netherlands that revealed both a looming generational conflict and a rapidly changing society. Young theatre makers felt that theatre was “dead”. In their view, the repertoire was outdated, there was no investigation of new artistic forms, and the connection with the audience and society had been lost. The world, they argued, called for a theatre that could directly engage the most pressing issues of society: the war in Vietnam, the inequality between men and women, unemployment, and so on. They believed that the younger generation could play an important part in renewing theatre, in communicating directly with its audience, but felt that the state theatres’ conservative hierarchical structures were depriving them of any influence.

The minister of culture at that time, Marga Klompé – and I think that was the real “miracle” of Dutch theatre – took their complaints seriously and decided in 1970 to effect a radical restructuring of Dutch theatre infrastructure and to redistribute available funding accordingly. One of her famous initiatives was a special budget for experimental and innovative work. As a result, all kinds of small groups, collectives, and ensembles popped up like mushrooms, some of which are still active today. This was the beginning of the development of today’s unique and heterogeneous Dutch theatre landscape that Karschnia praises so much. However, much has changed, as not only Karschnia, but also many others in Europe and beyond have recently discovered. The purported motherland of liberalism has thus revealed itself as a new model of restrictive rightwing politics with disastrous effects for, among many other aspects of life, the

arts.

### **An Ideological U-turn?**

Since the Netherlands' present right-liberal minority government was elected in October of 2010, with crucial political support from the far-right Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV), the Netherlands has rather quickly shaken off its soft liberal feathers. The "achievements" of this apparent ideological U-turn, to name but a few, include the introduction of a ban on all face-covering veils, a service for lodging complaints about Polish workers, and an integration test for all immigrants that is so difficult that even Dutch citizens have trouble passing it. One of the latest evidence presented as an argument against subsidizing art is an unprecedented slash in cultural spending, especially when it comes to experimental and non-mainstream art. The resulting severely limited arts budget is mainly used to support structurally a selective group of big cultural institutions, such as the National Ballet, National Theatre, and the Rijksmuseum, which are supposed to be representative of our national culture and preferably have an international appeal. Together, they form the so-called "Basic Infrastructure" (BIS). No doubt, the independent scene is under siege.

In total, the arts in the Netherlands are facing a 20% cut in spending (200 million Euros); the performing arts have been hit even harder, up to 50%. Although the budget cuts in the arts are part of a much broader package of austerity measures affecting healthcare, social security, education, and development aid – according to the government to fight off the financial crisis – it is clear that the arts have been hit disproportionately hard. At the same time, it is obvious that the 200 million Euros taken away from the arts will be a mere drop in the ocean of national financial needs. In the art field, this has led to the conviction that the government is deliberately picking on the arts, a view reinforced by continuous populist culture-bashing coming from Geert Wilders's far-right party, the PVV. Masters of rhetoric, Wilders and his party colleagues regularly disqualify art as "a left-wing hobby" and artists as nothing more than "subsidy eaters".

In his article, Karschnia notes his surprise at the absence of a public cultural mandate in the Netherlands. There has been no nationwide protesting to engulf the country. No one has taken to the streets to reclaim "their" art. No theatres have been occupied, as they have been in Italy and Greece. On the contrary, Karschnia observes, large segments of Dutch society seem quite

compliant with the new populism. He concludes his article with a call on all cultural workers to unite and raise their voice! However, when it comes to defending the arts, I have noticed that the field itself has trouble speaking with one voice. Defending against what or whom? And more importantly, defending on what grounds? What has struck me about the debate is that trying to secure recognition for art by invoking its autonomy appears to be taboo. Although in different ways and with different interests at heart, advocates and opponents of the austerity measures alike go to great lengths in claiming that art can and should fulfil goals beyond art itself, such as social cohesion or economic profit. In my belief, this is not helpful for securing a position for the arts in society in the long run. I will presently take a closer look at the debate and examine the different strategies of thinking that deny art its autonomy, so that I may challenge their effectiveness toward the end of the article.

### **“More than artistic quality...”**

Thus the motto of the current Dutch government’s cultural policy. The idea that ultimately art must lead to something other than itself could not be expressed more clearly. Artistic quality, according to Halbe Zijlstra, the state secretary for art and culture, is only the starting point in deciding about funding art. Central to Zijlstra’s thinking strategy is his conceptualisation of artistic quality in terms of “creativity”. Culture, Zijlstra argues, produces creativity. Creativity is a prerequisite for both artistic quality and successful entrepreneurship. Against all economic trends, he remarks, cultural industries are growing. The same creativity that is used to produce high-quality works of art should be employed to find and keep new audiences. Budget cuts, Zijlstra argues, help to create an independent, strong and flexible cultural sector.

Obviously, the discursive frame Zijlstra employs is thoroughly economic. Creativity is posited as an economic force. Artists and cultural institutions are addressed as cultural entrepreneurs. In order to qualify for money they have to demonstrate their shrewdness in exploring new financial sources and strategic partners as well as ability to attract large and broad audiences and generate, at least partly, their own funding. The legitimacy of art is understood purely in neoliberal terms. Whoever is able to create or find their market, has a right to exist. Therefore it is hardly surprising that in prioritising its budget allocations the government has mainly chosen to support creative industries (economic development!) and those cultural institutions that are representative

of the national culture (tourism!) and have an international appeal (cultural diplomacy!). Finally, cultural education is supported on the grounds that it stimulates creativity (that is, guarantees a steady supply of cultural entrepreneurs in the future!). Thus we may conclude that the government only superficially seems to accept art as a distinct field of production, in the sense that it produces a special kind of knowledge: creativity. But in the end of the day, its products serve a higher good: the economy. Art, like all other public domains, is subject(ed) to the logic and reality of the market.

Paradoxically enough, the fiercest opponents of funding art with public money do recognise, in a way, the arts as an autonomous sphere. However, in this populist discourse art's distinct position is used to suggest that art is different from other domains of the public sphere in a negative sense. Following the populist logic that whatever is different must be excluded or expelled, art is discursively positioned outside the public sphere. It is repeatedly stressed that art and artists are good for nothing (not even for themselves) and only cost us money. In a way, we could understand this as the idea of art's autonomy at its most radical: art serves nothing and therefore might as well not exist. Populist politicians use the "autonomy" claim to reassert their view that no money at all should go for such nonsense.

I would argue that, more than the announcement of the austerity measures, it is this populist discourse that has triggered the most emotional reactions in the cultural field. Its insensitive denigration of the arts has fired a burning desire to prove those culture-bashers wrong. However, as any art activist might tell us, trying to counter populist discourse requires its own strategies. Based neither on arguments nor on facts, but solely on perception and fiction, people mistakenly think that revealing fiction as fiction does the trick. Unfortunately, this method is unproductive, because not only is the discourse not grounded in the facts, it is also radically indifferent to them. Constructing fictions is merely a strategic political choice, made to attract votes and please the crowds that feel excluded or neglected. There is no better cure than picking on others instead. No kind of truth will cause people to miss out on that pleasure.

Nonetheless, in response to all the accusations some have resorted to defending the arts by arguing that art is indeed a part of society, has things to offer, does not only cost money, and that

it is thus valuable. To support this argument, two hefty piles of reports are typically put on the table, one calculating the economic benefits of art and culture to the public, the other demonstrating the positive effects of culture on social issues such as lack of social cohesion and respect, youth unemployment, and failing integration. As much as I understand and sympathise with the need to defend art, I truly believe that this line of argument is unproductive, not only due to the logic of the populist discourse as explained earlier, but above all because by trying to fight populist ideas one ends up affirming, no doubt unwittingly, the government's thinking that art can and must serve other, economic, goals.

Of course, for many on the government's side, the argument is a strategic one. In order to qualify for state funding and be included in the basic infrastructure one has to convince the state of one's entrepreneurial qualities. Again, this line of argument is highly understandable, but it is more about defending one's own position than defending art. One wonders if indeed it might eventually help us to build and sustain the idea that art is an indisputable and vital aspect of society, beyond political misconceptions of the day and relieved of quantifying measurements of its value.

### **The Taboo on Autonomy**

Stressing the social benefits of art is a recurring theme in Dutch policies on art and culture. It is a tradition for which we may very well be paying the price now. In the 1950s it was the government that emphasised art's role in educating the classes and strengthening moral values. Obviously, this was a top-down vision, based on the idea that elitist high culture should be brought to the people. In the late 1960s it was the young artists, mentioned before, who called on the older generation to get down from their ivory tower, to meet the public, and critically engage with social issues. By contrast, their approach was radically bottom-up. Of course, their engagement was part of a much broader social development that influenced contemporary politics and was reflected in the art policies of the '70s. During the '80s the government for the very first time refrained from making any claims or expressing any ideologically charged visions regarding art and its role in society. The government showed a hands-off attitude, operating in a practical and businesslike manner. In the '90s, as Camiel van Winkel argues, the art world made the unforgivable mistake of resuming, once again, the discussion of art and society, instead of

cherishing its autonomous position.

In the 1990s the government began receding from the public sphere, handing over more and more of its responsibilities to the local levels of government and social and cultural players in the field. Artists and local authorities were increasingly teaming up and cultural institutions grew into powerful players in local politics. According to Van Winkel, artists couldn't wait to jump in to re-stitch the social fabric with socially engaged projects of all kinds, whereby they consciously sacrificed their autonomy for the sake of political power and legitimacy. Step by step, art got incorporated into the bureaucratic world of funding projects, project reports, feasibility studies, evaluations, and the like, in which it is still trapped today. Van Winkel rightly notes the many similarities between then and now. However, the crucial difference is that first, one does not need to prove art's social significance anymore, but rather its economic value and second, until recently, money was hardly an object and projects were mushrooming all over the country, whereas today the money tap is no longer running at all.

Somewhat cynically and slightly exaggerating, we could say that robbed of its social significance, art is now left with nothing but the skill of writing project proposals and funding applications; a skill most useful for securing a place in the system. But what might have happened if the idea of a radical autonomy of art had not been taboo for so long? Would it be easier, then, to resist the current trend? Would it be easier to mount a convincing attack against the populist argumentation and its underlying ideology from the inside, instead of merely criticising the government for implementing the new measures too quickly, giving cultural institutions too little time to adapt to their new roles as economically viable cultural entrepreneurs? Would it be easier now to defend art as a public good that is not meant for all and that does not target everyone, but remains open to whoever is interested in it?

The reality is that our performance in the ongoing debate has been under the mark. At any rate, I feel that I have failed in defending the arts, since making a plea for the autonomy of art in an article is not the same as actively claiming that autonomy, nor will this article change my government's thinking on the matter. Maybe there has been enough of talking. It might be a better idea to let art do the talking from now on. I am romantic enough to believe that thankfully,

there will always be activist artists who can do no different than place themselves deliberately outside the system or on its borders, so as to be able to mirror, critique, or distort it; to carve out their own autonomy if society is not willing to honour it. I will take my hat off to them and applaud them. I am realistic enough to know that I do not have that courage, that I am among those who remain, although critically, within the system, trying to make the best of it given the circumstances, waiting till the hard times have passed (because I do believe that they will pass, if only due to the nature of political conjunctures). And yes, I am religious enough to realise that these activists are my indulgence.

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