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la Biennale di Venezia

52. Esposizione
Internazionale
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Partecipazioni nazionali

Dutch Pavilion A Critical Reader

Citizens and Subjects:
The Netherlands,
for example

Edited by Rosi Braidotti, Charles Esche and Maria Hlavajova

Foreword

Every two years the international art world gathers for the Venice Biennale, where the latest state of affairs in the art world is presented. This year, the Dutch presentation in the Rietveld pavilion is embedded in the larger context of a three-part project. *Citizens and Subjects* explores the current condition in western society with regard to issues of major cultural, political and moral consequence: (illegal) immigration, violence and enforcement and practices of maintaining security through fear and anxiety. The project is grounded in a belief that art is part of the world, and as such it can respond to the urgencies of our time by engaging with questions that affect us all. It consists of a complex, multilayered video installation and architectural intervention in the Dutch Pavilion by artist Aernout Mik; this critical reader, with contributions by Netherlands-based artists and theorists from a variety of fields that analyse and elaborate upon the issues raised by Mik's work; and an 'extension' of the pavilion where an additional platform for debating these issues, as well as the Venice Biennale in general, is created. We are particularly pleased that this 'extension' gives the contribution a home in a number of cities in the Netherlands in autumn 2007 as the result of a collaboration between BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, Utrecht University, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven and Witte de With, Rotterdam.

We are very pleased that curator Maria Hlavajova has developed such a challenging project in collaboration with Aernout Mik and a number of important writers and theorists in response to the appointment from the Mondriaan Foundation. We are confident that this project will fuel the discussion about the place of art in society that we find so essential today.

Jos Werner
Chair, Mondriaan Foundation

Introduction

Citizens and Subjects

Maria Hlavajova

Citizens and Subjects is a three-part project developed as the Dutch contribution to the 52nd Venice Biennale. *Citizens and Subjects: Aernout Mik* is a complex installation by artist Aernout Mik in the Dutch Pavilion, consisting of three new video works embedded in an architectural intervention in the Pavilion. *Citizens and Subjects: The Netherlands, for example* – the critical reader you hold in your hands – is an ensemble of texts and conversations written for this occasion. It is envisioned as a discursive space where the themes around 'citizens and subjects', as Mik introduces them in this project, are debated by a number of scholars and artists based in the Netherlands. In autumn this year, we 'extend' the project from Venice back home with the aim of contributing an additional forum to discuss the *subjects* of fear, anxiety, violence and national security that this project evolves around, as well as a question that we feel is critical to pose time and time again: why do we find it important to reflect on these notions in art? This 'extension', titled *Citizens and Subjects: Practices and Debates*, is the result of a collaboration between BAK, basis voor actuele kunst in Utrecht, the Dutch Pavilion, Utrecht University, Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Witte de With in Rotterdam and the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

Informed by the notion of national representation on which the Venice Biennale is based, *Citizens and Subjects* reflects on the nation-state in the present day circumstances of the so-called West and asks how we can negotiate its prospects vis-à-vis the challenges posed by that which defines our contemporary condition: (illegal) immigration. The starting point of this project – the work by Aernout Mik realized for the Dutch Pavilion – addresses this issue, as well as the fact that so far we have been incapable of resolving this equivocal riddle of major political and moral consequence. Instead of engaging a political imaginary of another kind, as Mik's work suggests, we seem to have handed over responsibility and power to the police to regulate the conundrum, turning the question of immigration into a key issue of national security. The project proposes this predicament as the paradigm of our contemporaneity and prompts us to think further about other possible ways that a new kind of political community could emerge.

To put it simply, a *subject* is a person who is under the rule or authority of a sovereign, state or a governing power and who owes allegiance and obedience. *Citizens*, by contrast, are generally those with rights, entitled to the full privileges of belonging to a state or nation. In his complex

multichannel video installation enveloped in an architectural intervention in the Pavilion, Aernout Mik brings such defining dichotomies of the privileged and disadvantaged into intricate interplay, exploring the mechanisms of power, fear and violence involved. The starting point for him is the question of how the police learn and make use of various methods of carrying out the law against refugees. Not only does Mik stage and film a 'training' situation (testing how stand-ins temporarily adopt the roles of policemen and refugees), he also employs documentary 'rushes' from actual police exercises or real situations in which violence is deployed against asylum seekers. It becomes clear that this is part of the larger context of how we train ourselves to respond to crises and threats to national security in general. On multiple levels, the work questions the simplified distinction between subjects and citizens today, asking, aren't we all actually subjected in the same way to this disquieting reality? Yet, Mik seems to suggest, it is from here that new possibilities can perhaps emerge. What if we interpret the scenes he stages before us not as training for the enforcement of law and the maintenance of power, but rather as a ritual through which to transgress the status quo consensus today? In this way, Mik's *Citizens and Subjects* represents an instance of cultural resistance that functions through the appropriation of existing modes of the politics of domination, reminding us of a field of ambiguity between subjection and possible liberation. The use of parody, the building of irrational excess, mimicry and re-enactment of situations can be read as a ceremony of inversion, overcoming the divide between subjects and citizens by questioning to what extent, and if at all, the traditional citizenry can offer a foundation from which to address the acute challenges of our day.

Contemporary art here is understood as a site where larger networks of cultural, political and social discourse intersect, thus creating new possibilities; a site where ideals that could potentially counterbalance troubling developments in the public sphere can be reimagined, where the moment of critique is offset by the creation of affirmative alternatives. The project *Citizens and Subjects* developed from the urgency to create a space within the traditional context of a large-scale perennial exhibition in which artists, writers, curators, scholars and the general public can engage in a critical discussion. In that respect, I feel encouraged given the prominence this project has already gained in the public debate in the Netherlands.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank artist Aernout Mik, who inspired this project, who has been a supportive companion in articulating all its facets and whose creative labour has defined the key parameters of our shared efforts. I owe my gratitude to philosopher Rosi Braidotti

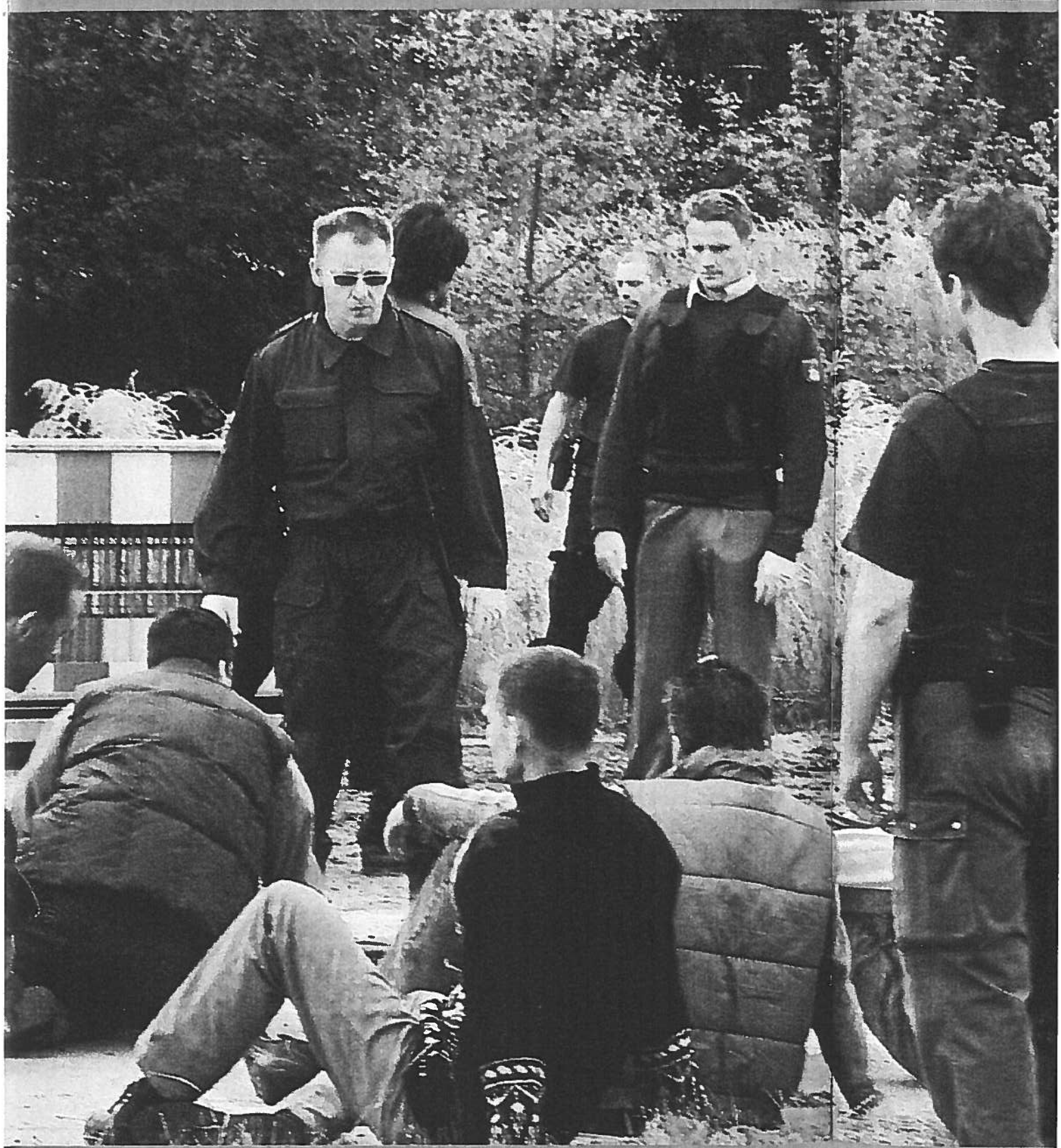
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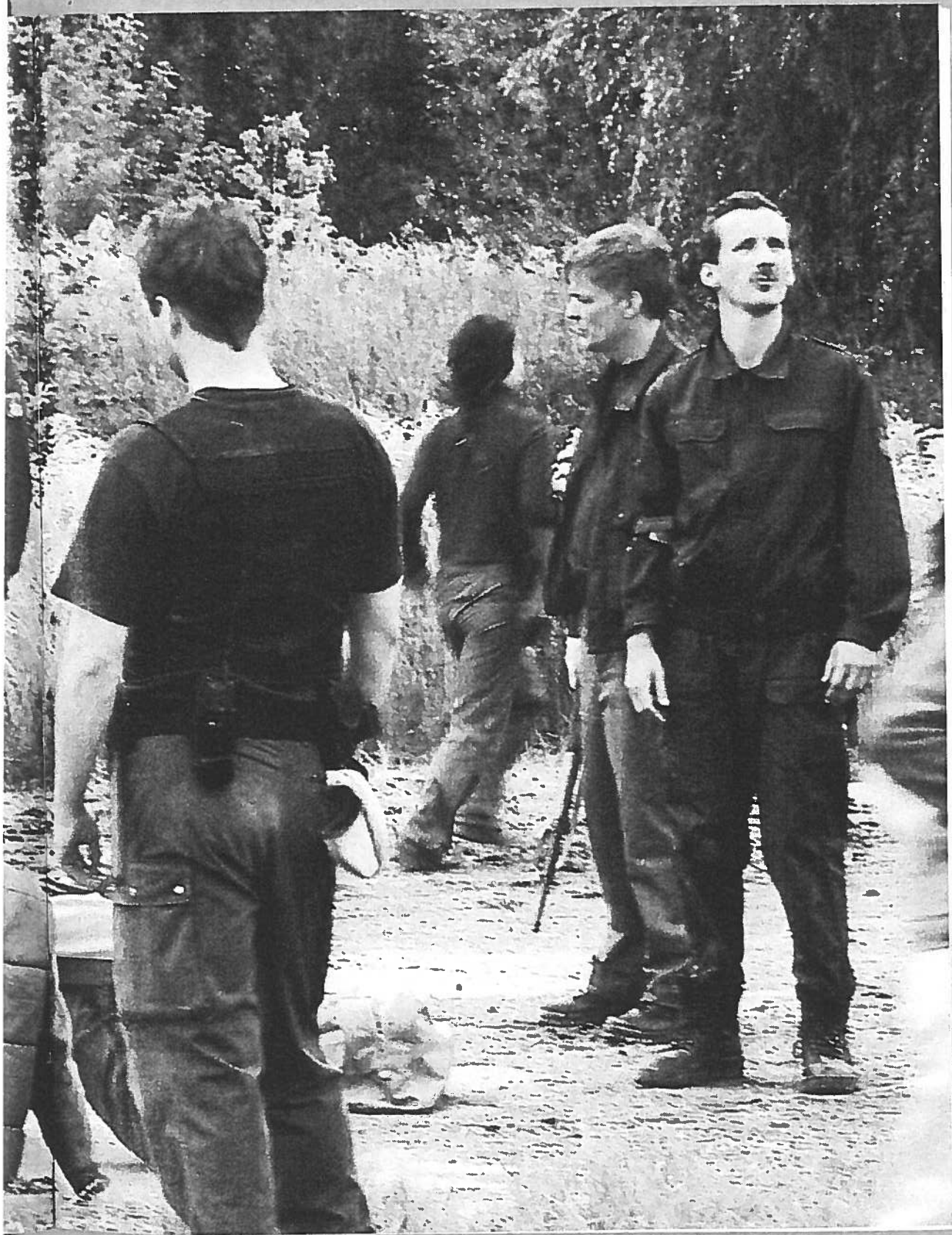
and curator and writer Charles Esche for joining me in editing this critical reader and turning their attention to critical thinking about the current processes of renegotiating the social contract in the Netherlands. Also on behalf of them, I wish to sincerely thank the contributors to this reader, whose texts and conversations will surely inspire public discussion and enliven the discourse. I also owe my gratitude to Jill Winder, associate editor of the reader, for her immense dedication and inspiring commitment to the entire project. For developing the forum through which the Dutch Pavilion comes 'back home' in autumn, I would like to thank my colleague Binna Choi at BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Rosi Braidotti and Melanie Peters of Utrecht University, Charles Esche and Annie Fletcher of Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and the *Be(com)ing Dutch* project and Nicolaus Schafhausen and Sophie von Olfers of Witte de With in Rotterdam.

For the realization of this project I would like to extend my compliments and thanks to Arjan van Meeuwen, executive director of BAK, for his patience and serenity in accommodating ever growing financial and organizational demands. My gratitude also extends to Marente Bloemhuel, who has been of great assistance to the project, as well as to Danila Cahen for her research work and support. For handling the matters of public relations and communication in an utmost professional way, thanks go to Beate Barner and Hanna Sohler. Similarly, I would like to thank Suzanne Tiemersma for her devotion to the project in all its conceivable facets and for helping me research and organize it all in a friendly and professional way, as well as Ankie Schellekens for her assistance in Venice. I would like to thank the entire organization of BAK for making sure this project is realized at the highest professional level, while equally dedicating themselves to our other programmes, as well as to BAK's board for support and advice.

I would also like to thank the board of the Mondriaan Foundation, commissioner of this project, and its director Gitta Luiten for their trust and enduring support of the choices I have made. I would like to thank the Municipality of Utrecht for kindly supporting the 'extension' of the Pavilion, as well as Vrede van Utrecht and a number of other financial partners named elsewhere in this book.

Last but not least, I would like to especially thank my husband Peter Baren and sons Samo and Luka, who were willing to make the sacrifices this work requires in one's private life, and who made me aware that both successes and failures in this profession are nothing more than a matter of the usual course of things.





**The Netherlands,
for example**

Rosi Braidotti, Charles Esche,
Maria Hlavajova

Let's take the Netherlands, for example. In a globalized and technologically mediated world, the protocol of national representation upon which the Venice Biennale historically and by convention insists offers the opportunity for renewed critical efforts. The project *Citizens and Subjects* reflects in different registers on the nation-state in its present-day circumstances. The reader that you have in your hands is one element of a three-part project also consisting of new work by Aernout Mik in the Dutch Pavilion and an 'extension' of the Pavilion through talks, discussions, reading groups and research residencies taking place in Utrecht, Eindhoven and Rotterdam later this year.

The nation-state that we have inherited from the nineteenth-century struggle for political representation still defines our best effort to bring about democratic accountability in the so-called West. In this context, it is worthwhile remembering that nationalism and social emancipation were once fellow travellers, with nationalism defining a progressive agenda in opposition to unelected autocracies. Still today, national citizenship encapsulates most of our democratic rights as citizens and subjects of our various territories. Despite the apparent waning of national influence, it is still national elections, the national press and media and the national heads of state that command the most attention in each country. While economists have long ago abandoned the nation-state for an analysis of larger trading blocks, almost every other form of social engagement is ruled by nation-states even when, with regard to such issues as climate change or pollution, the idea of borders is patently absurd.

It was not only the structure of the Venice Biennale that led us to the subject of this reader. The real existing condition of cultural politics and artistic production within this one nation-state – the Netherlands – is currently under review in a way not seen in decades. The old system of subsidies and state support is changing, though not being abandoned entirely. The international market alters almost everything at the level of expectation but almost nothing on the ground of general artistic survival. Institutions that once held themselves autonomous from governmental agendas and aloof from trade and industry now suffer from the shock of private caprice and public money tied to a mission. In many respects, the Netherlands is different from Belgium let alone Belize. It can neither claim universality nor a particular status that is unique to itself. Its peculiarities are tempered by generic Western-European and global conditions but they do not override them and, as such, the Netherlands is as valid a starting point as any other on the surface of the planet. It just happens to be our starting point and therefore our example.

The status of the example is an interesting and idiosyncratic one that has a significant heritage. As Giorgio Agamben writes in *The Coming Community*: 'One concept that escapes the antimony of universal and particular has long been familiar to us: the example. . . . It is one singularity among others, which, however, stands for each of them and holds for all. On the one hand, every example is treated in effect as a real and particular case; but on the other, it remains understood that it cannot serve in its particularity. Neither particular nor universal, the example is a singular object that presents itself as such, that *shows* its singularity. Hence the proper place of the example is always beside itself [Ger: *beispiel*, Gk: *paradeigma*], in the empty space in which its undefinable and unforgettable life unfolds.'

Being 'beside' is as good a definition as we are likely to find for the time being. It addresses the relationship of this reader to both the artworks by Mik and the general ambition of the Venice Biennale. Modest as its starting point is, the reader is intended to make us reflect on the global context in which the Biennale is taking place through the specific conditions found in the Netherlands. The aim is to think together through the words of individuals. The texts that follow try to account for the tensions and contradictions of our era from the point of view of this nation-state outwards. It is, in this sense, parochial or 'situated' – as feminist theorist Donna Haraway put it – but doing this may, at least temporarily, offer a resistant alternative to the onset of global travellers' syndrome, where we are everywhere and nowhere at the same time, only secure in the waiting lounge of the 'utopia station'. This syndrome is one that, while often very seductive, can never avail itself of influence over the citizens and subjects who are the focus of this project, at least under present political conditions.

Yet, geopolitical power relations are global and transversal to a degree that not only defies national boundaries, but has prompted Michel Foucault to target the notion of 'life' as 'biopower', a central political concept. The regimes of modern government need to simultaneously include and control the intellectual and psychological resources, but also the biological, generative, living forces of the very people (*demos*) who constitute the social sphere (*polis*) of democratic regimes. According to Foucault, ever since modernity a political technology of disciplining the bodies of the population has come into being, which takes the individual as a stand-in for the perpetuation of the group, the collectivity and the species. Regimes of 'biopower' aim to include as fully controlled elements the very vital forces that, per definition, escape political control – including the collective social imaginary. The paradox

of biopolitical regimes is therefore that they unfold onto the question of *Thanatos* or death in the sense of elimination, exclusion, and even worse, extermination or extinction. The politics of biopower affect those who are allowed to survive as well as those who are doomed to perish. It is a rather brutal regime of gradual, all pervasive selection, which takes the form of distributing and controlling the forms of entitlement to 'life', 'legality', 'visibility' and 'citizenship'. Agamben plays on different variations on the theme of subjection by referring to the human body's capacity to be reduced to sub-human, marginal and even non-human states by the intervention of sovereign power. 'Bare life' is that in which sovereign power can kill. It is the body as disposable matter in the hands of the despotic force of destructive power. In other words, to be a subject in an advanced liberal democracy means that one is simultaneously subjected to regimes of regulation and is also the active subject of self-implemented forms of affirmation. The gap between the negative and positive poles of power, however, and of the means to gain access to self-empowerment, is growing wider and deeper by the day, under the pervasive pressure of negative political passions, global warfare, structural injustices, gender inequalities, growing racism and a state of enforced fear and suspicion of others.

The further assumptions behind the project, in keeping with these theoretical insights, are relatively straightforward. Firstly, we take the Dutch situation as an example of what we perceive to be the failure of political imagination since 1989 to create concepts and invent practices that offer an adequate response to the challenges of our times. The political field fails the progressive forces in society at every turn, while many of the individuals who make up that society seek to gather round older centrifugal forces, most often those defined by the populist or racist right. This failure is tragic for our day and age and we believe it must be met by a response from a cultural field concerned with the furthering of emancipatory ambition. How it could or does do that is explored in these pages.

Secondly, we are concerned and distressed by the impoverishment of public debates about the intertwined yet conflictual relationship between citizenship and immigration, a state of anxiety that defines our contemporary condition. If fear and exclusion are simply part of national culture, it is surely one of the responsibilities of those who make and present that culture to take it up as a subject and context for their work. At a time when fear is at levels unprecedented since 1945, this becomes even more urgent. How to address this and to contribute to public debate, whether through the outspoken subject matter within artworks, or as spoken and

written positions from artists, social scientists and philosophers, is explored here. The chance to exert some, however limited, sway over public opinion at the Biennale, back in the Netherlands and beyond is one all the writers and interviewees here found too valuable to resist.

Thirdly, we believe that we need to learn to think differently about ourselves, as Gilles Deleuze put it. In times of accelerating changes more conceptual creativity is necessary. Instead of falling back on the sedimented habits of thought, institutionalized by tradition, we propose a leap forward into the complexities and paradoxes of our times. The project of creating new concepts and practices of active subjectivity, in opposition to pervasive forms of subjection, inertia and nostalgia, is a serious ethical as well as intellectual challenge. It positions us between a future perspective that cannot be immediately guaranteed and the fast rate of progress that demands the development of new propositions. We do need to address this deficit in the scale of representation about ourselves and the deep-seated processes of transformation we are undergoing.

We feel we need to elaborate up-to-date, lucid and situated accounts of the kind of subjects and citizens we are in the process of becoming. Learning to think about processes, rather than essences, means that we need to confront diversity (rather than confirm sameness) on all levels: cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic, aesthetic and otherwise. This entails as a necessary step that we abandon the self-replicating certainties that are bred from the repetition of over-familiar and taken-for-granted platitudes about our cultural identity. It is time to self-style alternative modes of identity – hybrid, multilayered, nomadic and complex – while keeping the notion of identity itself in play, elaborating new forms of flexible and transversal citizenship to match them. It is an urgent call to elaborate together new cultural, spiritual and ethical values – be it as myths, narratives or representations – that are adequate to today's world that we inhabit.

Last but not least we are passionate about our civil rights and freedom – and concerned about the fact that, in the absence of a political imaginary and leadership capable of meeting the present challenges, we seem to have handed over responsibility for regulation and enforcement to the police. If Mik's work depicts this in its complexity, this critical reader hopes to offer a way of thinking with and beside the current obsessions, to a moment where the broad field of art could open up emancipatory possibility again at the level of intimate exchanges between viewers, artworks, readers and speakers.

The choice to replace the traditional catalogue with a critical reader was made with all these considerations in mind. The main strength of this collection, in our view, is that it negotiates the complex tension between the multiplicity of political forces on the one hand and a sustained commitment to emancipatory politics on the other, without falling back on essential identities. While it is customary to argue for the primacy of the visual in art, our endeavour is grounded not only in the current urgency but also in the modern history of art as a propositional model and social experiment. This is a history that constantly returns at moments when it seems to be required, as we judge it is today. The contributors themselves explore many alternative cartographies of the Dutch situation and creative suggestions regarding how to go about addressing the current crisis. The voices vary from the analytical to the anecdotal, reflective, descriptive and provocative. In these different registers, we garner a picture of the potential for thinking about an exemplary location to generate broader resonances. The aim is thus to inform the global audience of the specificity and at times peculiarities of the Dutch situation, as well as to offer insights into the many resources and forms of resistant thinking that are at work in the Netherlands and that might determine the cultural development of this country in the future. The academics, artists and critical theorists who contribute to the reader also make a forceful case against racism and xenophobia and the extent to which both have intoxicated the public debate in the Netherlands. The stultifying effects of acquiescence, fear, verbal and political violence (the Netherlands have witnessed two political assassinations in the last five years) are analysed critically in a way that illuminates the complexities of the Dutch case.

Where the emphasis falls time and time again in the project, however, is on the need to work together towards renewing the grammar of our social interaction, the social imaginary about citizenship and cultural identity and the passions and emotions that go with them. The need to *reinvent* our social interaction clashes over and over again with the notion of a multiethnic society that seems only to evoke fear of invasion by alien 'others', whether out of true belief in the threat they pose or (and far worse) as an opportunist grab for power that eliminates nuanced discourse and provokes equally dumb and violent counteractions. The series of texts that follow combine criticism with affirmation to define, exploit and question this territory of *politica povera*. Terms that circulate and get reiterated in the public debate in the Netherlands today such as *klein* (small), *Nederland is vol* (The Netherlands is full), *angst* (fear), *kwetsbaarheid* (vulnerability), *poldermodel* (polder model), *intolerantie* (intolerance) and *allochtoon* (foreign-born) need to be scrutinized and

reinvented in a way that might infuse hope and emancipation into the discourse. In a modest way, we hope this might strike a more appropriate balance or even generate excitement about the possibilities that citizens and subjects of this state – and by example this planet – might see in their future.