

Dutch Critique of the Hermetic Contemporary Arts Discourse

Interview with Merijn Oudenampsen

By Geert Lovink

The Dutch sociologist and activist Merijn Oudenampsen) recently published an essay about the “incomprehensible art discourse.” It was Mieke Gerritzen, director of the Museum of the Image in Breda (NL), who pointed me to the piece, written in Dutch. The essay was published in the literary magazine *De Gids* (2015/5, pp. 6-9).

I was surprised to see someone raising this often heard critique in public. It needs some civil encouragement to address this somewhat taboo topic as those who raise it are easily accused of anti-intellectualism and considered not politically correct. Such critique is unlikely to emanate from the Anglo-Saxon West; nor will it stem from France or Germany. There is an additional risk factor as it can ruin one’s academic career, which so often depends on nepotism and informal networks that were built up over years.

The starting point for the article was a Dutch controversy over a Prix de Rome exhibit (2013) where arts journalists complained about the ‘complexity’ of the chosen art works. Ernst-Jan Pfauth of the online daily *De Correspondent* attacked the jargon used by the Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum. This, in turn, prompted a critique of the populist attitude among journalists. Every profession develops its obscure codes of expression.

In the anthology [Spaces for Criticism](#) (Valiz, 2015), Pascal Gielen and Thijs Lijster at first attempt to defend the use of jargon in art criticism. The difference, they write, in comparison to other professional circles, is that art criticism takes place in public, and is meant for the general audience. It is not happening behind closed doors. The writers note that also art critics themselves start to have difficulties with jargon. “Their jargon is becoming increasingly irrelevant, as it is simply exchanged for a different jargon—that of philosophers and sociologists.” Art criticism has been replaced by ‘art theory’ on the one hand and experts that value the investment done by large institutional players and the global elite on the other. Is this displacement just a matter of a sector in demise or does this also give us renewed opportunities for experimentation and dissent?

Merijn Oudenampsen’s thesis in *De Gids* is that the two Dutch attitudes, anti-intellectualism and the dominant theory jargon, are two sides of the same coin. The wide-spread desire to experience art works in an unmediated

fashion goes hand in hand with calls from the ministry of culture and the gallery market to remain competitive in the global market. This 'sophistication' can only be reached, and maintained, if works can be contextualized through international discourses, in English. Oudenampsen himself often refers to the writings of art sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and has already discussed this thesis before, in [Open!](#)

Geert Lovink (GL): You are currently wrapping up your PhD research at the University of Tilburg (NL), which deals with the rise of populism and the rise of rightwing nationalism in the Netherlands and beyond. You have also criticized the still popular 'shockblog' [Geen Stijl](#). Is it because of your familiarity with right wing pop culture in the age of the internet that you 'dare' to raise this sensitive issue?

Merijn Oudenampsen (MO): What prompted my intervention is a funny combination of familiarity with and estrangement from the worlds of art and theory. Seven years ago, I was a guest researcher at the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht, an art academy that hosted an important department of radical theorists at the time. Now Dutch society in general - and the art world in particular - is traditionally hostile to theorizing. So it took me some time to come to terms with the phenomenon: why all this high theory in an art academy? I had been trained as a sociologist and had my praxis, so to say, as a political activist in the alter-globalisation movement. Sociologists and activists share a very functionalist perspective on the world. You're accustomed to judging things as an instrument of social change, or as a functional element in the social structure. And, of course, Dutch culture is very practical as well. What added to my estrangement is that it was mostly radical philosophy being discussed: Rancière, Žižek, Badiou, Butler and so on. Much to my confusion, there seemed to be no praxis in sight at all. Worse, any attempt at application was seen as an insult to theory. I remember quite vividly a lecture on the work of Toni Negri and Italian Autonomous Marxism. When I asked how it related to contemporary marxist movements, the lecturer told me that philosophy should not be besmirched and instrumentalized by the demands of practice. Of course, I was perplexed. The lecturer was defending the autonomy of theory. Posing that same question about art: 'what is it good for?', often provokes a very similar outcry. It slowly dawned on me that art and theory operate according to a similar logic. Since then I've come to hesitantly appreciate the mixed blessings of autonomy. But I was such an alien creature in that world.

GL: The overall climate in the Dutch visual arts scene is anything but intellectual. For decades it was official policy that artists were not supposed to read books and make intelligent statements. They just had to shut up and produce hands-on, radical 'acts of beauty'. These artworks, in turn, were to be interpreted by professionals such as critics, curators, museum and gallery directors. And the general audience could pick up the scraps. Could there be a relationship between Dutch pragmatism, anti-intellectual culture and the supposed incomprehensible arts discourse?

MO: Yes, that's the crux of my argument. A very traditional, Romantic notion of artistic autonomy predominates in the Netherlands, even if it remains largely implicit. It seems to feed into a broader strain of Dutch anti-intellectualism. Reading Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* was very insightful for me. In this study, Bourdieu attacked the idea that art can be appreciated intuitively or spontaneously, what he calls "the ideology of charisma". Bourdieu used large surveys to show that appreciating art is not a personal gift but a skill acquired through education. He traced the idea of spontaneous appreciation back to Kant, who argued that aesthetic judgment departs from *Begrifflichkeit*. In other words: the enjoyment of art is beyond rational categories of thought. For Kant, the artist was a genius, rationally unaware of what he was doing, intuitively expressing the intangible beauty of nature. It's a bit like Jedi's and the Force in Star Wars. According to this perspective, when artists start thinking they stop producing great art. Also when explaining art to viewers, you ruin the artistic enchantment and reduce the complexity of the artwork. My argument is that a similar mentality exists towards theory. I've been to lectures in Dutch art schools where students with no philosophy training at all are exposed to very sophisticated high theory. They just don't have the means to understand it. Students are taught to relate to theory spontaneously and/or aesthetically. Of course, that results in the hilariously incomprehensible art blurbs one often finds in art exhibits. A way out of this problem is to break the pedagogical taboo and bridge the disciplinary divisions between manual and mental labour in the art world. The newly created PhD programmes for artists in the Netherlands are a step in the good direction.

GL: The visual arts infrastructure in The Netherlands has suffered from radical budget cuts imposed by the government. One of the few theory castles outside of academia, Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht, was dismantled. On the other hand, there are still some initiatives left that are known overseas, such as the Antennae Series by Valiz Publishers,

Open!(which before was a printed cahier) and the occasional titles published by NAI010 Publishers in Rotterdam. Then there are the efforts by the Van Abbe Museum, BAK en Casco in Utrecht. Maybe some have heard of the Former West research project, initiated and coordinated by BAK. The DAI MfA course (ArtEZ) in Arnhem is also becoming known internationally for its critical work and its uncompromised devotion to High Theory. There is Henk Slager with the MuHKA program in Utrecht. Lately even the Rietveld Academy/Sandberg Instituut in Amsterdam offered a Critical Studies MA. In your article you mention their Studium Generale lecture series. What do you make of this picture?

MO: There's a small archipelago of more theory-inclined art institutions. Relative to the artistic mainland, they represent the fringes of the Dutch art world. The budget cuts implemented by the previous rightwing government were organized in such a way as to target the more experimental, contemporary and small-scale initiatives. The cuts were motivated by a paradoxical mix of conservative, right wing populist and neoliberal elements. Halbe Zijlstra, then State-secretary of culture, was very explicit: the unparalleled size of the cutback - three times as large as in other sectors - was needed to prevent institutions from absorbing the cuts within existing structures. So the goal was really to forcefully eliminate some of the institutions and mentality created by the progressive cultural policy of the last thirty years. The cultural sector was condemned for being too self-absorbed, alienated from society and not accessible enough to a larger public. The quality of cultural production should be decided by visitor numbers and not by the opinions of experts in the art council, Zijlstra argued. At the same time, "national heritage" became one of the new key words. The more traditional and conservative parts of the cultural sector, such as the Rijksmuseum, assumed a central role in this new reality. But the paradox at play is that the new cultural policy also wants Dutch culture to compete internationally. So that gives some space for more critical and theory-friendly institutions, which largely operate in a more international context. But there is a big disconnect between the mainland and the archipelago. We have seen, with the firing of Lorenzo Benedetti from the Appel Arts Centre in Amsterdam, that the new businesslike attitude on the mainland puts the art world on a much tighter leash. There is a lot of pressure on Dutch art institutions to tick off all the boxes: one must simultaneously serve the Dutch audience, be internationally successful, be commercially successful, be diverse and locally embedded.

GL: In the article you describe a lecture on French philosopher Felix Guattari which most students don't seem to understand but enjoy because of its poetry and mysterious complexity. Isn't the problem here much deeper? Education in the Netherlands is not focused on Bildung but increasingly on professional training. If you haven't read Freud and Kafka, and don't even know who they were, why bother reading Deleuze and Guattari?

MO: This phenomenon has deep historical roots. The famous historian Johan Huizinga observed in the 1930's that Dutch intellectual life largely consists of the reception of foreign ideas from surrounding countries, and testing these to see if they were suitable to the Dutch climate, marked by "intellectual placidity" with "a deep-seated element of scepticism". Ernest Zahn, a German sociologist who wrote a classic in the eighties on Dutch political life, noted a dearth of interest in philosophical and theoretical problems in the Netherlands. The fundamental philosophical themes of man and society weren't conceived as theoretical and intellectual questions, he argued. The Dutch made do with religious dogma and moral principles. Zahn described the country as an old, solid democracy that can afford to neglect political theory. I'm currently writing on this phenomenon for my PhD thesis. The historian Perry Anderson published "Components of the National Culture" in 1964, a groundbreaking essay in *New Left Review* on the anti-intellectual, empiricist culture in the UK. He argued that the lack of political upheaval and revolutionary discord in British politics forestalled the development of political and sociological theory. There was no need to think society anew. Therefore, no radical intellectual culture developed. In the Netherlands there is a very similar combination of an anti-intellectual culture and a political history without major caesuras or upheaval - it is soothingly described by historians as a "cabaret" compared to the "high drama" of surrounding countries. But Anderson noted a change in British intellectual life due to the arrival of continental emigré intellectuals around the Second World War. They introduced theory in an anti-theoretical culture. Since then, intellectual life in the UK has developed tremendously, and London has become a European centre of sorts. Also in the Netherlands, after the Second World War, there was a sharp reorientation of intellectual life. But here it was a departure from the more theoretically inclined continental European culture and a still very dominant orientation toward American empiricism.

GL: As is the case in many non-English speaking countries, art criticism in the Netherlands is caught in the dilemma of whether it is obliged to

communicate in the national language to reach its own audiences or submit to the pressure to participate in the global conversations, in English. In the past, when there was still plenty of money, it was easy to declare that we do both, but these days there is less and less money for translations, and for publications in general. Publishing websites are supposed to produce their content, in English, for free.. Do you see in these conditions a necessity to return to Dutch in order to restore support for the arts in society without reverting to the national (or nationalist) frame of reference? Hasn't the widespread use of English contributed to the gap between subjectivity and culture, and instead of a solution has become a problem? Should we in fact conduct this interview in Dutch?

MO: I don't think it's very productive to tell people what language they should write in. But the gap is increasingly problematic. And Dutch institutions do prescribe the use of English. For example, Dutch academics are rewarded three times as much for English articles as for Dutch ones. Publishing books in Dutch is considered a hobby, something to do in your leisure time. This has an effect on Dutch intellectual culture. It is basically living apart together. The general audience reads in Dutch and lives in another world, intellectually. That broader Dutch audience is mostly served by journalists, who tend to be more superficial and more conservative. The field of newspaper and magazine art criticism is a good example. It is dominated by journalists with very traditional conceptions of artistic autonomy and art practice. Instead of defending the arts, the newspaper critics played a supportive role in creating the atmosphere for the budget cuts. They've repeatedly campaigned against political art, or more discursive, complex and experimental art. Newspaper critics like things that can be appreciated spontaneously. Of course the curators have a different mindset, but they are nonetheless obliged to pay heed to the newspaper critics. A critical art practice needs to take into account the conditions of its own intelligibility. If curators, critics and artists won't relate to the Dutch public in the Dutch language, someone else will do it for you. And on the long term, that will result in a very hostile climate.

GL: You point at recent polls which show that the Dutch population primarily sees arts and culture as entertainment. The goal of art works should not be to question, reflect, let alone critique society. At the same time people enjoy uncivilized attacks and provocative statements. I see a parallel here with the work you're doing on the conservative turn in Europe and the rise of right-wing nationalism. Is it useful to ask the question of what Geert Wilders'

position is in this matter? Or Podemos and Syriza, for that matter?

MO: Well, the right-wing populist politician Geert Wilders (PVV) was of course the most prominent force pushing for the budget cuts in the first place. He famously called the arts “a left-wing hobby”. I’ve argued elsewhere that there is a strange symbiosis between right-wing populism and neoliberalism. In the right-wing populist imaginary, culture is one of the most important bastions of class privilege. The Dutch Right effectively portrayed publicly subsidised culture as an opaque inner circle where everybody is busy granting each other favours. In this context the market becomes a democratising force: only the market can judge quality democratically on the basis of transactions, here understood as visitor numbers. As a political program this is very useful. Thomas Frank identified a similar logic in the American Culture Wars: the main political antagonism sketched by conservatives was between the common people and the cultural elite, not the economic one. Egalitarian attacks on the culture elite make it possible for the Right to attain support for an economic agenda that is decidedly less egalitarian. The same phenomenon appears again with Donald Trump, the economic elite is seen through a cultural lens, as ‘someone like us’, someone that talks and thinks like ordinary people, even if Trump has inherited most of his wealth. A left-wing populism is of course the inverse: it attacks the economic elite and aims to win the cultural elites to its cause. In the seventies, Bourdieu observed that people with lower incomes were relatively conservative in cultural terms and relatively progressive on economic terms. The political battle is whether one frames the political antagonisms economically or culturally.

GL: In a tweet Charles Esche, director of the Van Abbe Museum, wrote: “Elitist, self-absorbed, conformist, servicing the oligarchy are just some of the words that would describe 90% of the art world today”. This is yet another example of the renaissance of elite theory. Back in the seventies, the elite approach was criticized for its lack of ‘class analysis’. Is there a similar danger these days? Thomas Piketty has given us the ‘scientific’ foundation of the 1% slogan of Occupy. This is now widely accepted, quite different from 5-10 years ago. The middle classes are shrinking and the divide between the very rich and the poor is growing. As a result contemporary arts is openly accused of serving the 1%.

MO: Of course the art world has always been closely related with elite culture. And a lot of artists produce art for the art market, which is all of the

above. But neither the elite, nor the art world are monolithic entities. The political attack on the Dutch art sector cannot be understood if we assume that art is merely serving the oligarchy. Why would the oligarchy attack its own art institutions? One can make a rough distinction between the cultural elite and the economic elite. The former is in general subservient to the latter. Sometimes there is a clash and the relations between the two are reconfigured. What we have seen these past years in the Netherlands is basically economic elites disciplining and taking control of the cultural sector, which had a large degree of autonomy. Similar developments are taking place in universities, which are more and more being run like companies, while they used to be run by professors themselves. The Piketty complex expresses itself most clearly in the art market, and the record prices that are being paid for paintings. No need to bother with art discourse there. Money does the talking. The closed art discourse seems to be more a feature of the Dutch publicly funded arts sector, where most of the more critical and reflective art is being produced. The problem of hermetic art discourse is that it isn't serving anyone.

(Thanks to comments of Jorinde Seijdel)

Merijn Oudenampsen's essays in English can be found on his website:
<http://merijnoudenampsen.org/category/english/>.