

*Producing the contemporary  
along the hegemony of a  
past-day elite and a present  
silent majority*

## **A perspective on independent art spaces in the Netherlands**

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Over the past decade, I've been given quite a number of books by artist-run and independent art spaces, published on the occasion of their X-year existence, meant as calls-to-authority to policy makers and as relation gifts to the network. Hardly ever do matters reach another level: that of collective organisation, exchange of knowledge and so forth. People are simply happy celebrating yet another X-years of existence. It's also for this financial and time-wise lack to go beyond, that this text will not turn out a thought-through analysis of the Dutch situation, of contrasts between regions and nations, continents and cultures, but rather a kind of oral impression of the Dutch side – possibly the Noord-Brabant provincial side – that is to say my side of the story... for whatever that might be worth.

I came to work in the 'independent' arts in 2003 as a curator working for the artist-run space Lokaal 01, at the time based in Breda (NL) and Antwerp (BE). No idea why they hired me: I was just a bit of a 'want-to-figure-himself-out' kid, still studying arts and science at the University (not even an artist), who only just before, via artist friends, came about some art spaces, somewhere off centre in nearby cities. The people who ran it started it back in the late '70s–early '80s or came in after studying at art school and having started a career in the arts. Even though I was a bit of a strange duck to the organisation, I learned pretty much all I needed to know to work in the arts at Lokaal 01 – even more than at the university where I graduated a little later in arts policy (a particular history proven worthless to me while producing the future and having to cope with the day-to-day blindness of cultural policy's prophecies) and cultural identity (good) – and even more working at the Van Abbemuseum some years later, where learning about the arts was more about familiarising myself with forms of meetings.



KOP, Breda  
Iwan Smit  
*I've Got The Power!*, 2015  
Photograph by Michelle Vleugebels

What I learned at Lokaal 01, a knock-out for me at the time, is that there are certain people who go about discovering really particular stuff by their own conditions, not so much through conceptual written analysis (philosophy), or by test and check and double-check (natural sciences), or fiction (literature), but rather by creating experiences that through matter enter our environment and our sociability, and thus become present. These people (many call them artists) were to be respected, for who is a specialist in that particular unknown but that person, and how better to respect that experimental domain than by respecting the integrity of that person, and how better to position and promote that domain than by using the only way to manifest it besides the encounter of the work (which is the responsibility of the artist): by using ugly words? In love with speculative wonder, I suddenly felt I had found my place. This bunch of inarticulate individuals offered me a home.

The 1970s and early 1980s was a time when the economy went down while the welfare state was establishing itself, under guidance of the typical Dutch compartmentalisation of society through top-down political governance, wherein all Catholics and Protestants, the Socialists and the – at the time minor – Liberals, submitted to the few political parties who ran the nation together. In the enduring, yet slowly dying, spirit of a post-war urge to stimulate cultural uplifting, the late 80s and early 90s became a time wherein any graduate self-proclaimed artist could get a



↑ **De Fabriek**, Eindhoven  
Main workspace and exhibition space  
De Fabriek is an artist-run space founded in 1980, situated in an old factory building from the '60s.  
*Photograph by Peter Cox*

→ **KOP**, Breda  
*Dream On*, 2012  
Installation view  
*Photograph by Rachelle Delcroix*



← **Onomatopée**, Eindhoven  
Guys at the bookshop  
*Photograph by Fieke van Berkom*



minimum wage, and when huge collections of public art were gathered, consisting of all too many locally produced works (many of which were recently dumped on the market or just put out with the trash). Even up to 2012, there was additional support in income for recent art school graduates. This was all inspired by notions of cultural capital, dominant within high-culture, when people visiting operas experienced historical legacies of revolutions after they drove in with leased cars, and after having purchased an artwork in a gallery, not knowing they were not part of society but were only part of a ruling class.

As a consequence of this top-down imposed idea of cultural uplifting (possibly a secret fear for radicalisation among smart dissidents to society), a minor part of policy made it all too easy for a complete social group of societal drop-outs called artists to give rise to their own economies in artist-run spaces. Their position was informed by motives such as (in our city) “inherent quality of arts” (I never knew what that motive meant) or, as (in our province), the “autonomous visual qualities of arts” (never knew what that meant either). Primarily these motives were the all-too-generic rules to fixate an art policy that supported the idea of emancipation through cultural uplifting. This bureaucratisation of bullshit motives turned out to be the gospel of a self-centred art world developed in parallel to the rise of the '80s yuppie culture of self-enriching kids that slowly, but gradually, took over the cultural authority of the post-war baby-boom generation; that of former hippies who effectively ended up being complete social democratic revisionists, too tolerant to see through the decadence of the third way.



**BAK, Utrecht**  
Exterior of the BAK building  
*Photograph by Victor Nieuwenhuijs*

Over the course of the mid-'90s and into the early 2000s the Dutch art field slowly – very slowly in hindsight – started to change (no paradigm shift, simply little improvements). Pushed by the Mondriaan Foundation (founded in 1994), art spaces and artist-run spaces had to ‘professionalise’, and as their role shifted to mediation, the name label slowly changed to ‘presentation spaces’. Artistically this meant that curating entered the field, and in managing terms it meant that policy became a more prominent factor in day-to-day management of these spaces. These changes were – and still are – considered a doom-scenario to those celebrating unconditional artistic autonomy (inherent value/autonomous qualities) within the art field itself. On the opposite end, even though there was a slowly growing awareness amongst policy makers that things should not to be taken for granted anymore, they did sustain a scene of independent art spaces. This proceeded for a while, as the former hegemonic political parties kept ruling the nation, even though the Catholic middle-of-the-road block lost position over the course of the 1990s.

But then something started to change, as in the early 2000s pioneering Dutch populist Pim Fortuyn stood up and the nation polarised, and polarised even more when a mentally troubled guy gunned him down. In hindsight Fortuyn seems the ideal Dutch citizen: outspoken, humanist, indifferent to authority yet tolerant to difference. What really changed was the turn to complete economic liberalism wherein the liberal idea of cultural uplifting stopped being a top-down public responsibility; while for Fortuyn, solidarity and cultural uplifting were apparent even if on an individual basis, this stopped being evident to his even more radical populist followers, resulting in a complete abandonment of respect for liberal research and development – formerly perceived as Cultural Capital – and instead opting for individual choice within capitalism under cultural protectionism inspired by a fear of the different. Over the course of the late 2000s, this idea completely put aside the cheap rhetoric of former-yuppie baby-boomers, rejecting the idea that public funding serves cultural uplift, that culture and arts has inherent quality, that there is something such as autonomous visual qualities.



→ KOP, Breda  
 Gitte Hendriks  
*Building Site/Building Sight*, 2015  
 Photograph by Imara Angulo Vidal





↑ **Onomatopoe**, Eindhoven  
*Photograph by Fieke van Berkum*

← **Extrapool**, Nijmegen  
 Maarten Bel making cassettes with  
 sound and voice on the spot during  
 a series called *Landstaal*

This is the point when government policy changed motivation: when belief for non-economic motivated research development and experiences were set apart by its prime investor. The objective turned to economic results, to independent, self-organised turnover, primarily via social segregation of target groups that divide culture among likes and un-likes. Although the arts, academic research and much alike, might have segregated from egalitarian access, it was primarily because mediation was supported too little in a society that simply did not respect cultural capital anymore, and turned to experiences. The citizen became a consumer and a producer. No greater cause in the arts is possible anymore, as the greater objective is no longer supported.

When, as a result of this change of perception, the arts were faced in early 2013 with their biggest budget cuts ever, they completely lost track of progressive public interest and had to turn to segregation even more, whether it be a focus for a segregated public fund to have blind people visit a museum of visual arts; or a focus for a segregated public by making profit via a party for youngsters during a museum night; or a focus for a segregated public with a high-end entrance fee to an afternoon with collectors. It is all market motivated and audiences will never blend anymore: the institutions will just change the interior, clothes and tongue to meet the demographics of their visiting consumers. But what this means most of all is that the perception of art will always be framed to the eye of the target group, and, as a result of this turn to the *target group* over the former humanist focus for cultural elevation, the economic basis for independent production for a greater cause of humanist man is abandoned. From now on, art will align itself with an agenda, with a subculture, with a segregated economy. There is no public good, there will only be publics of which some might survive and some might be ignored as unviable.

The problem within resultant contemporary cultural consumerism is the lack of what's on offer, of access to ambiguity and doubt and of radical differences produced from a position standing above the cultural spectrum (as art effectively should). This leaves an inability to face the contemporary: to actively engage the doubtfulness of our being in the face of our history, and in facing our (lack of) opportunities. The idea that art is about joy and beauty f\*\*ks up the capacity of art as a force of cultural empowerment and is a mindless capitalist construct exploiting a capitalist experience economy. Basically, this is a political choice, as we can also opt for other options.

I feel that it is out of a necessity to speak up for this humanist solidarity that independent spaces exist, stimulate production of a cultural meta-individual uniqueness, and try to deliver that with all the means available to an audience. It is for this reason, I feel, that Dutch independent spaces still call themselves presentation spaces – ranging from small spaces in the provinces such as Hedah in Maastricht, to established places such as Witte de With in Rotterdam – and have organised themselves in a union called De Zaak Nu (The Now Case), which is the equivalent of Common Practice in the UK. Likewise we see a new awareness among Dutch artists who organised themselves in Platform BK: a new collective way of organising work-spaces for art, design and architecture in ceramics, metal, graphics and more; and see growing awareness within a relatively a new type of organisation: art-clusters who rent out spaces, manage studio spaces and more. This is happening at various geopolitical levels: the city, the region and national.

I know many of my colleagues in the field will disagree, but for a long time, prior to the excessive budget cuts that forged a cultural paradigm shift, the art field, and the independent spaces in particular, felt they were tolerant to culture while they actually turned their backs to culture. Nevertheless the accomplishments within this all-too-segregated scene were remarkable in the way that it progressed our legacy of humanism into an era of increasing complexity. We need to be able to doubt within our horizontal proximity, and art does so within our experience, within direct encounters. It does so by demanding us to experience by our human capacity, positioned above taste, religion or anything whatsoever, and thus liberal in that sense. That is the biggest task for independent contemporary art spaces. It will never be unconditional or autonomous, even when the conditions might be vague, too experimental to legitimise in parallel to the experience of the work delivered, but that is exactly what living in the contemporary means. That is what true cultural production, true development means: setting hearts and minds, opening up. This implies the belief that we can all think for ourselves, and the necessity of battle while facing our present reality. It's a way to counter fear for eternal cultural shifts. As any other hegemonic culture we call democracy, it might be said that The Netherlands is simply changing one form of cultural dictatorship (that of an elite) for another (that of the silent majority, unwilling to emancipate). Yet what is most problematic is the fact that we ignore the use of the human capacity our parents have left to us as well. Why should we not finish the project of modernity, called emancipation and freedom, especially as hierarchy is abandoned and the individual is finally left on its own?



I'm active in local lobbying for small art spaces (K9 in Eindhoven), initiated provincial organisation, and am a board member of De Zaak Nu. It's a f\*\*\*ing lot of volunteering work but together we can gain knowledge that helps us to inform others and ourselves. This knowledge can inform all stakeholders, either private or public, and convince them to invest. Locally we're too few spaces to come up with serious data, but nationally we can – and this data can be mirrored in a local setting and therefore be of representative value. Moreover, within the local scale, some organisations are featured who don't have paid staff (permanent or freelance), and might not even have a permanent office, and are therefore in a very precarious situation, while within the national context, some big organisations are featured. What I mean to say is that we should not be afraid of other levels, but should try and push for the right attitude in all levels. Whom if not us should do this? Nobody is going to care otherwise.

And if that would not work out, we can always turn to revolution, I once heard Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt say. I would not dare to argue that.

Nieuwe Vide, Haarlem  
Vito Willems,  
video installation with sound  
*20 years of deferred value*, 2015  
20 1-day solo exhibitions  
Photograph by Saskia Burggraaf

