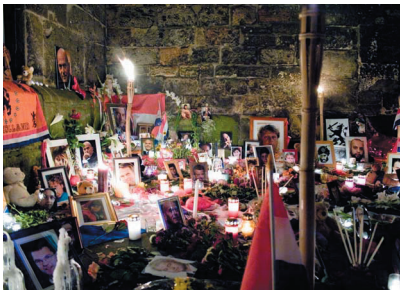


'Freedom is the possibility to determine one's own conflict'

Interview with Jonas Staal

by Daniel van der Velden

November 28, 2006



Daniel van der Velden

My reason to interview you is your lecture at last Sunday's symposium – 'Liberté, Egalité, Responsabilité' – that was held in honor of Pierre Bernard, recipient of the Erasmus Award 2006. This symposium, and more in particular Pierre Bernard's own presentation, highlighted not only some of the most iconic 'political' works ever made by European graphic designers (i.e. Grapus), but also pointed at the melancholia and ambiguity that seem to surround some of the ideas and practices of artistic engagement nowadays. The contrast between your presentation, with pictures of bombed cars, Dutch right wing populist politician Geert Wilders, and so on, and the lecture of Berlin-based designer collective Anschlaege, could not have been more striking. Anschlaege, with their grass-roots approach, show that real changes in the public domain are still possible, as long as you personalize the public – not privatize it. All their works, and their political effects, if you will, resulted from an engagement with strangers – a prerequisite for 'public domain' at large.

What was melancholic about their work, I found, was that despite its positive energy it still felt like a 'bannerless' protest, like an initiative of which we need just many, in order to build an ecosphere of alternatives. While this might be the case, we cannot escape the fact that while Anschlaege works on its projects without an ideological banner or a political foundation, Grapus made some of its most acclaimed works commissioned by the French Communist Party.

Your presentation, for me, focused more on the presence, or absence, of foundation for engagement. It seemed like your point of view is not so much the issue of engagement as such, but rather its relation to what can be verified. You voiced the opinion that the sources that channel our experience of the world and hence, also our resistance to it – 'the media' – do not offer such foundation and cannot provide for a basis for engagement; in fact, given the situation, 'unambiguous engagement' cannot be enacted, only 'unambiguous distrust'. In that sense, I found that you voiced – at risk of being downright cynical – a principal dilemma that was sidestepped not just by all other speakers, but by the whole context in which the Erasmus Prize was organized.

We are not so much concerned with the public sphere, as much as with the extent to which it has been taken from us.

In this context I would like to quote Thomas Hirschhorn – an artist you perhaps like – who, in an interview with Alison Gingreas, says:

'I came to Paris to work for the graphic art collective Grapus right after school. I wanted to work for them because I admired their form and their political engagement. For me, these two elements are inseparable. (...) Yet, while working at Grapus, I began to realize that they functioned like any other commercial advertising agency. They worked for the unions (les syndicats), for the Communist Party... but this realization was a shock to me. There was nothing revolutionary about this work!'

Jonas Staal

I'll answer your questions in an intuitive order instead of a chronological one.

You said that I risked being 'downright cynical'. I do not think this is the case. People often look at my work and my stance as an artist as being 'cynical' because there is such a lack of serious analysis done by artists today. Works by Anschlaege, as well as my own, show that we basically move within the same working platform even though our points of view are very different – which was a nice surprise; to see that on the level of contemporary 'visual communication' the boundaries between 'art' and 'design' easily vanish when you work from conceptual principles. I see my work as similar to that of French novelist Michel Houellebecq. One could call him cynical too, but I'd rather call him a realist – or at least someone who intends to be one. Same thing for Joris Luyendijk, the Dutch journalist that I quoted in my lecture. I think these people represent the true will for engagement, because not only do they analyse their subjects within society, but also their own position towards it. In one way you could call them 'bringers of bad news', but for me they bring good news, because they do not only analyse a subject itself, but also the way that we view it; how it is formed and deformed by the person who 'delivers' it. They analyse their message on a contextual level, searching for objectivity by involving their own subjective point of view. They show their own inability to break through existing codes of communication, and in that respect I strongly recognize my own point of view being an artist.

I'm very familiar with the works by Hirschhorn. I have often been criticized for my use of the 'memorial' form (see 'The Geert Wilders works' and 'Icons 2002-2006') in relation to his 'Raymond Carver-Altar' and the 'Ingeborg Bachmann-Altar' installations (among others), even though on a conceptual level, they have hardly anything to do with each other. Hirschhorn also made these installations because of a personal bond he felt with the people they depicted (see also the Deleuze and Spinoza monuments and the 'Ingeborg Bachmann-Kiosk'). I do the exact opposite – I show 'mediated' images in a directly physical way, as if to overcome the distance it has in relation to our actual daily life.

I do understand his critique of Grapus. I was also surprised that Pierre Bernard hardly gave any insight into his perception of engagement, or on the role of his poster images within this sense of 'moral involvement'. What I missed most of all was a retrospective view of his position towards the communist ideology that he supported with his works. Gerard Hadders didn't do this either, even though he clearly distanced himself from the idea of 'ideological engagement'. For me the question would be whether their work has anything to do with engagement at all, or just with manipulation – as Hirschhorn refers to Grapus as a 'commercial advertising agency'. This was a question that I addressed during the lecture: how to distinguish visual communication from visual manipulation?

What is most important for me is to start 'engagement' from ground zero, to accept that hypocrisy and manipulation are not just a part of our perception of the media, but that they have become the foundation of it, and that everyone of us has to rebuild the language with which we want to speak about relevant subjects in society. My main goal is to create an 'existential' art, an art that generates images that mark our deformed perception of the world in a fundamental, almost symbolic kind of way. I do not regard the media as an abstract machine that functions autonomously from the public – as some critics of the media do in a Kafkaesque way. Most of all I see the media as an enlarged view of our own need to find order in a world that seems to lack order altogether. I think all of our forms of expression – art in particular – have this need for order in their basic principles.

I think it is also important to stop reading the term 'engagement' in relation to the sixties and seventies. In that context 'engagement' is an ideal in itself. This was basically the main point of my presentation. The questions you pose show a similar approach when say about Anschlaege 'what was melancholic about their work, I found, was that despite its positive energy it still felt like a 'bannerless' protest, like an initiative of which we need just many, in order to build an ecosphere of alternatives.'

If I understand you well, then it would seem that you have approached the presentations in a similar 'idealistic' way, one which is looking for solutions and testing the different presentations on their ability to generate a response to so-called problems. For me the problem is first of all that the language we use to address the world around us is insufficient, and that we have to analyze this situation before we can even talk about the possibility or impossibility of contemporary forms of engagement at all.

December 2, 2006

DvdV

I haven't presupposed any 'solution'. What I am trying to address here is the quest for a socially and politically conscious practice and the elements that either enable, or block such a way of working. You link this quest to a nostalgic sense of the past, as opposed to which you claim a 'realist' approach which does not need to rely on faded beliefs and political convictions that once were at the basis of 'engagement'.

I would like to argue that the political system in which we currently live, is all about discouraging political oppositions; it is rather about a 'realistic' approach, where our opposed views are 'melted away', so to speak, in an amalgamate of consensus, public-private partnership and 'best practices', where everyone is encouraged to behave 'professionally'.

In that sense, while your position as an artist is clearly political – for me your presence at the symposium affirmed that – I am in a strange sense puzzled about your position of 'unambiguous distrust'. It seems, at least at face value, similar or analogous to the 'distrust in politics' that is typical of the populist movements – see Fortuyn and Wilders.

I think the big difference between Anschlaege an Grapus on the one hand, and your work on the other, lies in the attempt to formulate 'positive' images (as with the former), or 'negative' images (as with the latter). I do not think that your art necessarily provides an 'unmediated' experience of – and hence direct confrontation with – realities that we're being fed, and simultaneously distanced from, by the media. One could argue that your work on the contrary inscribes art into the very system that it attempts to criticize, namely in a simulated or 'unreal' experience of global unrest.

How do you view art's task in employing the senses to formulate a counterreality? What is your counterreality? Or should we conclude that your counterreality already has been defined as 'the media', and your work, rather, is reality?

Your current approach seems to rely strongly on the viewer not knowing, or at least not being sure, whether this is 'art' or not – reacting to the work in an anxious or confused way. The 'sensory threshold' of this ambiguity could move steadily upwards to the moment where the artist would not just show the remnants of a 'terrorist action' (such as a burnt-out car), but would actually himself engage in a terrorist act. I see no principal reason why your method of working would block such an outcome. So my question: how far will your artistic strategy take you?

JS

My work proposes a realist approach to 'contemporary consciousness' – especially in relation to the media and the mediated image. I'm a realist in that I show how I am unable to distinguish the 'real' from the 'false', hence 'the art of distrust'. I'm not pretending to show real bombed cars, I'm trying to show the impact that these images have gotten by influence of the media. It is about really being unable to distinguish the unmediated world from the mediated one. I am saying much more about my incapacity than about specific political problems. My work is derived from any historical frame of reference, it's all about the image, that in itself is a manipulated mirror of an actual event (or better: from multiple events, as the 'Car Bomb' works were made based on pictures of about two hundred bombed cars): it focuses on an almost archetypical meaning that certain images have obtained.

I try to re-insert a necessary amount of doubt about these images. I try to show that our need for order should be coupled with a sense for doubt.

I am not saying that our current political system is undermining possible oppositions. The codes we use to interpret global or national problems cannot be trusted and we have no reason to believe that the 'free market of the media' is seriously motivated to be objective. Think of the exaggerated representations of

global terrorism and local crime. These counterfeited views result from the hermetically sealed ideology the media has generated.

In November 2005, Holland was shaken by the story of two young men having threatened to hang a disabled woman's dog on a tree if she would not hand them over them a certain amount of money. As the woman did not have enough cash with her, the two men hung the dog by its collar, physically abused the woman, and . Politicians reacted furiously. Dutch politician Wilders even offered a 10,000 Euro reward for locating the two men.

Not very long after this incident, the police found the woman had fabricated the events as she was suffering from a mental illness. She herself had killed her own dog. Strangely, the media paid much less attention to the latter story than to the original, and as a result, for many people the assault on this poor innocent woman is still symbolic of a kind of loss of 'Dutch morality'. Her behavior basically worked more or less in the same way as my art. With a few simple actions, she made herself the symbol of helplessness and defencelessness. The growing group of conservative parties in the Netherlands has been claiming a loss of 'norms and values' lately. However, this story's real impact starts with the media's lack of need to find clarity, their disinterest in showing a necessary sense of doubt towards the immediate appeal that events like these seem to have.

You have linked my ideas of 'the art of distrust' with the Fortuynist movements that have fixated Dutch politics since 2001. Recently I spoke to Ronald Sørensen, founder of the Rotterdam party 'Leefbaar Rotterdam' that made Fortuyn famous in Holland. Sørensen and me spoke because of the censorship of an exhibition that included one of my works. In this conversation I realized that in principle, many of our points of view are quite similar, although he is a populist and I'm not. Still, we think similarly about the concepts of 'direct democracy' and a rather conservative need for new 'local' forms of government and a verifiable economic system. I try to show these ideas in my work in relation to the 'art world' – trying to overcome or work from gaps between the representation of the world within the arts and the context these images originally emerged from. The way I work with the idea of 'distrust' differs though. I'm not specifically cynical on a political level, I'm even quite trusting towards our government in comparison to the aggressive way some people have criticized it when it comes to security (anti-terrorist measures) and immigration. I think my work shows this too, by being a necessary part of a democratic system. In this it has a 'bell-ringer' function, but I can partly fulfill that role thanks to the very same system. I'm tolerated – by some (art) institutions stimulated even – by the same system that I criticize. That doesn't mean that I do not clash with the authorities rather often, but the fact that I can keep doing what I do also means that we still live in a system that allows self-critique and analysis. Even though current political trends seem to demand a kind of 'mechanical' implication of the law, illustrated best by politicians like Rita Verdonk (Dutch minister of immigration for the liberal VVD party), that got famous with their 'rules are rules', a response to the left-leaning opposition which criticized her strict implementation of immigration laws (which Law professor Dorien Pessers compared to the 'Befehl ist Befehl'-mentality under Hitler).

To address your final questions on my stance towards an audience unaware that the works or 'phenomena' I produce are made from a artistic point of view and to the relation my work has to 'terrorist' acts. How far am I willing to take this approach in my work?

Your question touches upon the risk my installations run of manipulating an audience. This is the result of the often vague area that I work in: between art and public space and between an artistic (theoretical) frame of reference and the media (often a part of my work). That my work risks being manipulative is borne the choice to work with extremes. That's what happens on the borders of the public and the private, the legal and illegal. I do have much respect for the viewer though, and one of my objectives is to bring a globalized, mediated world back in touch with the everyday, re-creating a dialogue that has been completely overlooked by the media. I try to stimulate new public analysis, but in some cases the questions I address end up in an artistic discourse and not in public space. I do wish to address questions in public, accessible and without having to declare an artistic context to the public in order to approach them with my propositions. The risk of misinterpretation is a logical part of this approach. I'm taking this further at the moment, trying to get rid of some of the last 'artistic' and 'composed' elements in my work. The result is a series of an almost activist nature on the subject of Dutch (Western) hypocrisy, that I will start January 2007. The borders will be driven to an absolute. So to answer your final question: yes, these can

no longer be defined as 'artistic' products or actual 'activist' public acts. More and more my art will be a question in itself; it will be about the way art functions, not about the way that it looks.

I don't mind the idea of creating 'negative' images. I see that as similar to the process in which photo film is produced. In one way, society shows the 'positive' final print; I'd like to create a remembrance of its origin: the negative.

December 8, 2006

DvdV

I wholeheartedly agree with Dorien Pessers in her argument about 'Befehl ist Befehl'. But the starting point was you. Perhaps this conversation became eventually very much a talk about whether or not your work in itself is a finished argument. I think it is not yet, of course – who wants to be finished? I think your work relies heavily on the viewer knowing or not knowing, and when you are announcing a new series of works that – from January on – we will no longer be able to recognize as such, I immediately wonder how far you will push the boundaries. I would be interested to see how, eventually, such events might produce a press/media coverage that 'reproduces' the question mark you are after. This brings me to my final questions. What was censored from your work and what made you then speak to Ronald Sørensen of Leefbaar Rotterdam? Finally, during your talk at the 'Mind the Gap' symposium you said that in your life, nothing really is happening. Could you tell me what happened to you yesterday?

JS

The 'censored' work was the second (and final) presentation of the 'Icons 2002-2006' piece. The exhibition it was part of was called 'Dutch triptych', and focused on contemporary so-called 'Dutch identity'. Just a few days before the opening of the exhibition the local municipality and their 'safety coordinator' blocked us from entering the exhibition space, as they were afraid of extremist reactions to the work. With my piece, they were afraid of pictures of various politicians, Dutch public figures and some of the so called 'Danish cartoons'. As a reaction we ourselves 'censored' the works in cooperation with the submunicipality on the condition that they agreed to discuss their reasoning with us while the exhibition was on. For us it was a way to integrate the situation in the exhibition, which for the occasion was called 'Dutch triptych/Censored version'.

Because of a wave of attention from the media, the press and local politics, the submunicipality decided at the last moment not to discuss their 'involvement' in public. I did discuss the relationship of politics and art with some of the local political parties though (in private), with the PvdA (the centre-left labour party) and Leefbaar Rotterdam. For me this was interesting because of the relation between art and politics; you could say that our freedom of speech had been infringed upon, but for us it was obvious that working within society means that you always discuss and re-invent the rules that you can or can't break. It's an ongoing process between authorities and citizens. Leefbaar Rotterdam in particular presents the idea of 'freedom of speech' as an unlimited right to say what you want – which is a dangerous thing in itself. How can one even be certain that someone 'says what he wants' and does not say what someone else wants?

When I said that 'nothing really happens in my life', I meant that my surroundings do not force me into any major conflicts, as previous generations have experienced. I defined freedom in my text as 'the possibility to determine one's own conflict'.

To answer your question directly:

Yesterday I reread parts of Gombrowicz's 'Ferdydurke', I continued reading De Asielzoeker (The Asylum Seeker) by Arnon Grunberg, I read through a whole bunch of teen pornography and downloaded about fifty teen porn DVD covers, I read the Vrij Nederland, but it was not very interesting. I wrote two proposals for new works, cleaned my house, chose the films for a Tarkovsky film night ('Stalker' and 'Nostalgia'), I listened to young rappers from Rotterdam South ('Heinek'n') and worked through some conflicts with my colleagues from the 'Dutch triptych' exhibitions, this among other daily duties.

My work is not a 'finished' argument and this is not my goal at all. My work generates from a constant sense of doubt and distrust. The works are much more about the incapacity to understand the world

around us than about understanding it, or pretending that I do.’•

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