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The Platform of Commitment

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‘We are the world’ was the title of the group exhibition in the Netherlands pavilion at the 2003 Biennale in Venice, and there is no better way to describe present-day commitment in art. The works that were shown there formed a perfect summing up of what commitment has given the world in the last few years. The exhibition adopted the multicultural face that the culture of the Netherlands had so deliberately sought, while at the same time it combined the extremes of social commitment in one space with the work of Jeanne van Heeswijk and Alicia Framis. But the title, with all its irony, was above all so effective because it shows the vagueness associated with the notion of commitment at the moment. As Lex ter Braak, director of the Netherlands Foundation for Fine Arts, Design and Architecture, put it at a symposium on new commitment: ‘All art is committed, because artists concern themselves with the world’.¹ Commitment has become so general in form and content that it lends itself without any difficulty for a prestigious existence in the official arts circuit, as could be seen in other pavilions as well. This is remarkable since commitment and bodies like the traditional museum have not always got along together.

The museum is often regarded as an obstacle in the contact between art and the world. While the work wants to engage with reality, the museum classifies this endeavour in advance as image. The involvement with the world can be shown in the museum, but it inevitably remains ineffective. That is why avant-garde artists display an aversion to established institutions that goes hand in hand with the search for other platforms for their art. Whether we are talking about the avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s, that of the 1960s and 1970s, or the latest wave of the 1990s, each time the same idea pops up: the museum has to be destroyed, avoided or radically changed. But it is a good deal easier to identify the scapegoat than the site where it is all supposed to happen. We can imagine a lot in connection with terms like ‘the street’, ‘life’, ‘everyday reality’, but very specific they are not.

The attempt to escape being encapsulated by the space of the museum and the desire to share the fate of genuine life are thwarted by the realisation that art entails the museum. Precisely because the museum is the place par excellence where random products can be recognised as art, those products can only continue to fulfil their function as works of art provided they are set within the golden frame of the museum. So the striving for commitment is often accompanied by an erosion of the parameters of art. Utility and necessity seem to come better into their own once the accursed label ‘work of art’ has been removed. It is possible to indicate a number of points in history when art tried to link itself in this way with the world. This is not the place for a full historical treatment, but it is worthwhile to consider a few of these moments. The 1960s and 1970s play a crucial role in this respect. We recall them as the years when terms like communication and interaction made their debut, but the 1960s also seem to have been the period rather than any other that has consciously or unconsciously served as a model for artists of the 1990s.

A group of artists who already in the mid-1950s wanted to replace existing forms of art by political and socio-

political analysis and working for a better society was the Situationniste Internationale. The involvement of the Situationists with the world knew no limits: no less than the total revolutionising of everyday life was on the agenda, and art, even in its avant-garde variant, was regarded as a thing of the past. It is therefore curious that there were plans for an exhibition of the group in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1960. A closer examination of the proposals, however, shows that the commitment was supposed to emerge from a playing off of the museum against real life. A labyrinth was planned in the Stedelijk where the visitor could wander around in spaces with different atmospheric conditions. Narrow, long spaces alternated with high ones, rain, wind and mist, everything was possible. To underline the disruption of the spaces of the museum, the access to the whole would be through a (fake) hole in the outside wall. During their trip through the labyrinth, visitors would hear tape recordings of Situationist conferences. At the same time, however, a *dérive* was planned in the city: members of the Situationist Group would wander through the city looking for remnants of authentic existence, in permanent contact with a central post manned by Constant. While visitors to the exhibition were undergoing a fake experience, they would be made aware of the fact not only by the emphatic Situationist commentary, but also by the event outside from which they were excluded.

It is hardly surprising that the project was cancelled. It might even be surmised that calling it off was a part of the strategy.² Although the work of this group is immensely popular at the moment and the word *dérive* crops up all over the place, it is worthwhile to note the difference from today's compulsion to participate. For the Situationists, there was no suggestion that by taking part people would arrive at a better life, gain insight, or find any other kind of satisfaction. The actions were intended solely to prepare for or explore a future society, and total revolution was the condition of its coming into being. Since art could not play a role of any significance in the status quo, there was no way of presenting the actions as if it could. Even so, action needs a platform too, so the Situationists chose the word to prevent it from disappearing without a trace. The spoken or printed word was the appropriate medium for avoiding the society of spectacle and at the same time disseminating the absolute analysis.

Commitment in art came to an end for a time in the late 1970s. One of the last projects clearly shows how large the dilemmas had become. At the invitation of De Appel in Amsterdam, in 1978 the French artist Hervé Fischer organised a project within the framework of his Art Sociologique. In those years the idea of a world revolution had already shifted somewhat into the local neighbourhoods. Fischer proposed letting the residents of a particular neighbourhood fill a page in a newspaper themselves. He preferred a problem neighbourhood, like the Bijlmer in South-East Amsterdam, but both De Appel and the newspaper involved, *Het Parool*, though each for reasons of its own, wanted the project to take place in the Jordaan district in the centre of Amsterdam. Although in the end the page was filled for a whole week with small pieces written by local residents, the project suffered severely from internal contradictions, such as the way in which words were put into people's mouths or the role of art. Although one of the aims of the project was 'to let the people speak for themselves' and to reinforce their sense of dignity or identity, a lot of preliminary persuasion was needed to get them to put pen to paper by themselves, and desk editors then had to direct the word and the identity clearly in a certain direction. For instance, criticism of government bodies was favoured because social change was one of the priorities, while complaints about foreigners (also a permanent aspect of the 'cosiness' for which Amsterdam is famous) were excluded as undesirable. To disguise the fact that strings were being pulled behind the scenes, the organisation of the project was not allowed to mention that it was an art project, and certainly not that an art institution was behind it. In the meantime photographs of the project were shown in De Appel, so that the schizophrenia that seems to cling to committed art became fully visible. For while the artist bade art farewell in order to do something real on the platform of the world, the result was shown on a different platform, the art institution that had funded the project, with the result that the genuine action became symbolic. There were two different platforms that excluded one another, but that were simultaneously occupied by art.³ It was no longer possible to disguise the ambivalence of committed art, and artists increasingly saw themselves faced with the choice in those years of capitulating to capitalism or breaking radically with art and going underground.

Although it would require a separate text to fully chart the Postmodern aversion to commitment, a few points can be singled out here. It was above all the principal premises of the politically committed art of the previous decades that had suddenly lost their validity. The belief in authenticity was replaced by the idea of a code, and the notion of direct action and direct involvement was replaced by the realisation of the inevitability of mediation. But it is above all the collapse of a coherent view of the future and the belief in radical change that destroyed the foundations of commitment. The ambiguity inherent in a project like Fischer's was dissolved by drawing the consequence that art is irrevocably art and that the museum is art's natural habitat. At most art could expose the dominant codes and cultures; it had little to contribute to political or social change.

But let us return to the Netherlands pavilion and examine the international spectrum of commitment that was offered there. At first sight there hardly seems to be any political commitment of the kind described above. Although Alicia Framis has emphatically been concerned with the world for years, and the public space is a prior condition of her work, it still seems to concentrate on the individual encounter. At first she used her own person for that purpose, as in the project *The Dreamkeeper* (1998), in which she kept watch by someone's bed for a night. Her most recent work on a special collection of clothes for demonstrators seems to be related to society at a more general level, but here too the encounter occupies pride of place, for example by the presentation of the line among football supporters who do not know what is going on. Her work is thus a good example of what Nicolas Bourriaud has called 'relational aesthetics'. Contemporary art is about relations between people and precisely because of that, he argues, it is in opposition to the art of the society of spectacle. It is a criticism from within, artists have their feet firmly on the ground, which means that the big revolutionary model or the absolute utopia has been replaced by the micro-utopia, because artists realise that direct critical action is based on an illusion of originality, on the assumption of a position outside the world that is no longer tenable, or might even be labelled regressive.⁴

Bourriaud also provides the basis for the dominant notion of commitment: art is a relationship with the other, and thereby the work of art demonstrates a relationship with the world.⁵ This definition makes it possible not only to compress the world in the individual, as Framis does, but also to contribute to the world as an individual, as seems to be the case in the work of Jeanne van Heeswijk. She believes with conviction in the potential of art and mainly organises projects in which she involves not only residents of a particular neighbourhood, but also other artists, designers, etc. Encounter is central to her work as well, which presupposes that communication and exchange can lead to an improvement in the conditions in which people live out their lives. Van Heeswijk's work is barely tangible – the process and the organisation of what may come out of it in the course of time actually constitute the product of her artistic effort.⁶ An important element in it is the link with the local, with a community that is allowed to speak for itself or charged with identity. Still, no matter how active artists may be, this has little in common with the action around which art centred in the past. A major reason for this difference is the lack of an overarching social perspective to serve as a guideline for action. General notions of communication, interculturality and exchange have come to replace a politically charged vision of the future based on a strict analysis of the dominant abuses. The basis for much committed action in public space is no longer the disruption of the system or the erosion of the structure, but individual contact or interaction with a limited and clearly circumscribed group. The emphasis is on participation in everyday life, not on action that unmasks everyday life and exposes the hypocrisy of power.⁷

This return of commitment can only be grasped if we keep Postmodern doubt at the back of our mind. The lack of an overarching perspective, the impossibility of escaping from the world, the awareness of mediation, the choice of small-scale contact instead of large-scale change, are all features that emerged at the same time as Postmodernism. The realistic, pragmatic attitude on which it is based also affects the relation with the museum and the art world. While commitment in the past believed that it could only function by turning its back on the museum and slugging the art world, present-day artists recognise their dependence on the institutions that disseminate art. Artists organise actions, exhibit the results and publish on them in art journals and books

without making much of a fuss about it. That does not mean to say that this art has no ideals. On the contrary, this commitment is based on models of communication and interaction, as we have seen. Although artists are aware that they cannot escape from the label of art, that does not stop them from using direct contact to tinker with that label. But it is precisely that ideal of removing distance that renders a clear message impossible. The action can only succeed when it is an end in itself; any more long-term effect would make it a priori subordinate to a determinate meaning that would thwart the interaction.

The tendency to make social interaction itself the theme of art is not just the ambition of artists. Exhibition curators and the cultural departments of all kinds of government bodies have welcomed this new trend in art to approach the neighbourhood or community in a new way, and in doing so they display an unlimited confidence in the potential of public participation. An example of this is the project for the Kanaleneiland district of Utrecht, where Jan van Grunsven and Ineke Bellemakers have set up a socio-cultural enterprise that will take several years. The initiative and the funding come from the Utrecht Local Authority, which envisaged two projects: an investigation of whether art could contribute to the socio-cultural context of the district, followed by a second to give the residents in the district more confidence in the future of their locality. It was evident to Van Grunsven and Bellemakers that this was not just another art project, but that it must make an impact on the socio-cultural context of the district. So once again we are talking about a process, not a product. All the same, in this case the outcome seems less non-committed. Since during the formulation the artists discovered that the plan for the restructuring of the district, of which the art project was to form a part, was nothing but a vague notion in the heads of a few managers in the Utrecht Local Authority, they decided to take the first step themselves in the direction of a new approach to an actual restructuring. The plan, which consists of a number of stages, the first of which is a project with the primary schools in the district, increasingly tries to involve the residents themselves in order to arrive at the formulation of an integrated approach to the restructuring.⁸

No matter how understandable and refreshing this new commitment may be in its willingness to engage in direct action, a few critical comments are in order. The desire on the part of artists to be more than decorators of everyday life and to link an existence within art to social interaction is completely legitimate, but its legitimation has its price. Artists today can be as light-hearted as they like when it comes to the relation between the different platforms on which they present their art, but they seem to underrate the effects of the platform itself. In the present case that platform is neither the medium nor the site. Both of those elements came to be regarded as equals in present-day culture some time ago: anything can be art, and art can appear anywhere. The frame and backdrop are determined nowadays much more strongly than before by the rules, descriptions, objectives and justifications that go along with projects of this kind. As a result, the field of play of art is demarcated in a way that tries in advance to rule out surprise or ambiguity, and that for that very reason can only bring about a dubious effect. Hervé Fischer's newspaper project was already determined to some extent by the party placing the commission (De Appel) and the medium (*Het Parool*), but in the case of Framis' Dreamkeeper project too, the influence of the institution was greater than appears at first sight: candidates who wanted to have Framis beside their bed were not only actively recruited but also carefully screened.⁹ That form of control is present in the background more than ever in social projects in public space that are carried out by the artists involved and commissioned by the local authorities. Of course, there is cooperation with the residents on the spot, and of course the policy of the local authority is raised for discussion, but the question of exactly what government bodies have in mind when they initiate this kind of large-scale and expensive project is not raised. I am afraid that the answer has to be sought in the symbolic content of the art projects. The local authority provides the platform on which the art can be shown, and even if the artist claims that direct action and interaction will be the result of his or her work, in the end it is merely a social process that is performed, a game that is played, and one that by definition will fail to have any consequences. Managers are very pleased with projects of this kind: they confer on them an aura of dedication and involvement without their having to do much for or about it.

The socially committed art of the present betrays a strong predilection for the game. Jeanne van Heeswijk

enabled visitors to the Netherlands pavilion in Venice to take part in a game of Risk. Other projects assigned a major role to working with children. This is not only the return of Huizinga's *homo ludens*, who was also important to the Situationists, but it is also an attempt to forget about the platform by addressing a group for whom the notion of art does not yet have any meaning. Direct action and actual contact are only possible when fixed notions and imposed frameworks are lifted, if only for a moment. For the artist that is a condition of being able to do something that can produce an effect again, while for the government that funds such an enterprise very different interests are at stake. To flesh out the symbolic content, and at the same time to underline the seriousness of the enterprise, without forgetting the legitimation of the amount of money and energy that is put into it, a project of this kind cannot tolerate any ambiguity at all. Precisely because the function of the enterprise is difficult to pin down, because its outcome threatens to be ambivalent, to say the least, every doubt is removed in advance by means of explanations, information brochures and other media by which the consensus society tries to keep itself going. *Homo ludens* is not awakened to lead life in a radically different way, but to play along in the big game of bogus responsibility that we all play.

The committed art of the present suffers from the lack of ambivalence. There has been a growing tendency in the large exhibitions of the last few years to explain works whose content or provenance indicate an involvement with the world in such a way that hardly anything is left unaccounted for. However subtle a work of art may be, the big machinery of institutions, curators and the government, which wants to use art to stage its own involvement with the world, will not tolerate any confusion and strictly rules out any possibility of different layers of meaning. Thus in the history of committed art, text has moved from the artist to the target group to end up with the party placing the commission and the government. Involvement has become a set of regulations.

The Netherlands pavilion also presented a work by Erik van Lieshout. His film *Respect* was shown in a rickety wooden shed filled with Rietveld cinema chairs. Although this film is clearly about the world because it is set in the neighbourhood where Van Lieshout lives among a majority of immigrants who are not classified as Dutch, visitors were only too aware of the fact that Van Lieshout had dragged them into an art project. But that is precisely why this work could say more about the way in which art can show a concern for the world than the works that so openly wear their commitment on their shoulder. Art should be concerned about the world, but artists must continue to create their own platform and not allow themselves to become string puppets in the official commitment show.

Notes

1 Symposium in Smart Project Space, Amsterdam, 23 March 2003.

2 'Die Welt als Labyrinth', *Internationale Situationniste*, no. 4, June 1960, pp. 5-7. See also Roberto Ohrt, *Phantom Avantgarde*, Hamburg 1990, and Thomas Y. Levin, 'Geopolitics of Hibernation. The Drift of Situationist Urbanism', in: Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa (eds), *Situationist Art, Politics, Urbanism*, Barcelona 1996, pp. 111-139.

3 Jeroen Boomgaard, 'De utopie van de argeloosheid. Een korte cursus engagement', *De Witte Raaf*, no. 77, Jan.-Feb. 1999, pp. 23-25.

4 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, les presses du réel, Dijon 2002, pp. 28-31.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

6 Mirjam Westen, 'Jeanne van Heeswijk: The Artist as Versatile Infiltrator of Public Space: "Urban Curating" in the 21st Century', *N Paradoxa*, vol. 12 (2003), pp. 24-32.

7 For the rise of committed art in the USA see Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another*, Cambridge (Mass.)/London 2002, esp. Chapter 4: 'From site to community in new genre public art: the case of "Culture in Action"', pp. 100-137. Incidentally, the ambitions and pretensions are often just as grandiose and directly recall those of the 1970s, although that period is not explicitly mentioned. For instance, Jane Jacob, one of the artists involved in the Culture in Action project, put it like this: 'In the 1990's the role of public art has shifted from

that of renewing the physical environment to that of improving society, from promoting aesthetic quality to contributing to the quality of life, from enriching lives to saving lives' (Kwon, p. 111).

8 Jan van Grunsven and Ineke Bellemakers, *Verkenningsoopdracht Kanaleneiland-Transwijk/CONCEPTVERSIE/1*, Amsterdam, November 2000, and Voortgangsverslag <re-start>, Amsterdam, June 2003.

9 Kwon shows how an artist and a specific community are often interlinked in advance in terms of content, so that there is not much scope for their own contribution. For instance, the US artist Renée Green was invited for a project in Chicago with the group with which she would be working, and the nature of the work was practically laid down beforehand. Kwon: 'Which is to say that the matchmaking mediation of the sponsoring institution, inevitably motivated by the presumption of an artist's interests and the anticipation of a particular collaborative project, often reduces, sometimes stereotypes, the identities of the artist and the community group' (Kwon, pp. 140-141).

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