

# About the Political Potential of Contemporary Art

Jonas Staal



## Introduction

The political potential of contemporary art in what is sometimes known as the post-ideological era lies in revealing the constant *ideological battle* that is masked by what we jokingly call parliamentary democracy. I see art as an instrument in making this battle manifest again and in showing that, beyond the pathetic democratic conceptual framework — Participation! Diversity! — a genuine *difference* is conceivable.

For an artist like myself, public space is the democratic arena par excellence, the place in which public conflict and confrontation have to take place, the place in which *political existence* takes shape, the place in which we can say that we are not merely dealing with politics but with *our politics*. Not politics in which we contract out our vote, but politics that consists of the process of *learning how to shape it ourselves*. Art is an instrument with which to make this voice not only heard but also *seen*.

The text below further explains these starting points by using three of my projects as illustrations.

## Stalinlaan

I would like to start with the history of the Vrijheidslaan (‘Freedom Avenue’) in Amsterdam, which was the core of one of my projects in 2009. I’ll begin by releasing a document, a letter that was a major part of this:

To: Oud-Zuid City District  
P.O. Box 51160  
1007 ED Amsterdam

Rotterdam, 21 May 2009

Dear staff member of the district of Amsterdam Zuid,

After the Netherlands had been freed from occupation by the Nazis in 1945, the various countries involved in this liberation were honoured by having streets named after their leaders. The Amstellaan became the Stalinlaan, after the Soviet statesman Joseph Stalin. The Zuider Amstellaan and the Noorder Amstellaan were also rechristened as Rooseveltlaan and Churchillaan. When, on 4 November 1956, the Soviet army was sent to the People’s Republic of Hungary in order to suppress the massive rebellion of the populace — which

started on 23 October 1956 and is known as the Hungarian Revolution — the residents of the Stalinlaan angrily changed their street’s name into Vier Novemberlaan. They also sent a request to the city council to either make this name the official one or to rename the street Amstellaan again. A majority of the city council supported the residents but preferred the name Vrijheidslaan. The Mayor and Aldermen agreed with the council members. Despite virulent protests by the Communist Party Nederland (CPN), the decision to change the name was taken in November 1956. The Stalinlaan officially became the Vrijheidslaan.



In 1956, the sign of the Stalinlaan in Amsterdam is replaced by one bearing the name, Vrijheidslaan.

On 4 March 2009, the Vrijheidslaan was changed into Stalinlaan through my instructions. With this letter, I send you a street sign for the Stalinlaan, made by the firm, Sign & Traffic. I do this because I am convinced that it was never your intention to repeat Stalin’s manipulation of history, for example when he removed his later political opponent, Leon Trotsky, from photos that still showed them together. The street sign meets all necessary requirements for street signs in public space. I hope to have been of service to you by restoring the street sign to its original state.

Kind regards,  
Jonas Staal



Jonas Staal, Stalinlaan (2009)

Important in this story is that there is no rationally fixed starting point; I could just as easily have changed the Vrijheidslaan into Amstellaan, the name the street bore before the Second World War. Or, using the same line of reasoning, I could have removed the street sign, referring to a time when there was no sign and the street had not yet been turned into an ideological game board for the dominant

political order. Getting to my point, there is no clear substantiation of any original name or image that can be the legitimate beginning for a change; there is no old that has to make room for the new, there is merely the *historical urgency* that made the street a place of ideological confrontation and conflict at several points in time.

After World War Two there was an urgency to etch the liberation of the Netherlands into the collective memory, to ‘never forget’ and to chisel *absolute* gratitude to the liberators into the street scene: there we have Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin. The Hungarian Revolution *differentiates* the freedom which at first appeared to be unambiguous and was just as unambiguously recorded in a street sign. By 1956, the residents of the Stalinlaan distrusted the freedom brought by the Soviet army under Stalin; this freedom was no longer their freedom. This freedom had been tainted by *ideological interests*, which — beyond the universal democratic peace and human rights — resulted in a political order that had imposed a *lack of freedom* on Hungary.

This experience of historical urgency found its natural conclusion in the proposal to change the name of the street into Vier Novemberlaan, out of solidarity with the Hungarian People and, at the same time, as a *reminder* of the Dutch people’s own underground resistance against, and suppression by, the Nazis. The liberators of one country turned out to be the occupiers of another country. The underlying conclusion seems to be that if the Soviets had liberated us for ideologically false motives, *it would have been better if they had not done so at all.*

But then the city council itself intervened. The call from the residents, for a street name that acknowledged the suppression of the Stalinist regime, was erased with which can safely be called the ultimate *hat trick* of parliamentary democracy: the Stalinlaan was rechristened Vrijheidslaan. Because who could possibly take offence to freedom? And wasn’t freedom what it was all about in 1945? The answer is No — when the residents came up with a street name out of solidarity, freedom was still a *matter of principle*; the freedom the city council was concerned with had withdrawn from this essential debate and represented a whole new *totalitarian order*.

Because changing the Stalinlaan was *in itself a liberation* — a liberation of the ideological matter that confronted post-war Holland, namely that there is no such thing as neutral, universal freedom; there is only freedom that is established by, and articulated from within, *power politics*. The name Vrijheidslaan created the illusion that liberation by the Soviet army could be liberation *without* signature-

because — so the perverted line of reasoning went — the regained freedom itself was real but the intentions of the soldiers were not. Through the Vrijheidslaan, Amsterdam city council celebrated a *conflict-free freedom* — a freedom without *ideological responsibility*, a freedom with *clean hands*.



Jonas Staal, Be free! Or else... (Liberation Day, 2010)

This freedom is the freedom of *democratic ideology* — a freedom cut loose from the individual interests and barbaric violence of the previous century, a freedom in which everybody can participate and in which everybody must be kept on board, a freedom to exclude fundamentalism, a freedom to just act normal, a freedom to do nothing, a freedom to limit freedom when the terrorist meter hits the red or the street terrorists make the street unsafe as the vanguard of the barbarians who are preparing an assault on the enlightened gates of Europe. This is a freedom that represents her actual counterpart, a freedom that is best understood as *diktat*:

*Be free!*

This diktat implies a trade-off — something from the past has to be dropped in order to become part of this new *freedom without interests*. At this point, it is important to introduce the historic concept of *iconoclasm* in our time as a concept that can explain the dynamics behind this trade-off: the destruction of the alien — a potentially radically alien culture or position — for the sake of a normative

system of values, but *without showing this process or exposing it as such to the world*. This trade-off is only successful when it is not *recognized* as such but presented as a natural process of primitive customs toward Western Enlightenment ideals. Through this process, which aims to establish an absolute, and therefore non-existent, concept of freedom (what do we do once *everybody* has finally been freed?), an interesting ideological battle is taking place.

### Replaced Street Signs

The Chinese district in The Hague, for instance, has had its own street signs for some years now, written in both Western and Chinese characters. In itself, the phenomenon of a Chinese district is odd enough; were we to speak about Moroccan or Antillean districts, it would imply disastrous integration and excessive segregation. But, in the case of the Chinese, one of the worst integrated groups in the Netherlands, this is not a problem when it comes to language and distribution. The apparent lack of fundamentalist political or religious character and the — also apparent — *humble attitude* of the Chinese made sure they could taste something of the *freedom without interests* that is so characteristic of the democratic ideology. This implies an acknowledgement of difference — between the Dutch and Chinese culture — that is merely tolerated within the stainless steel framework of the Dutch monument of the street sign. A *difference without a real difference* as an example of Dutch tolerance.

When, propelled by this democratic principle of equality, the writer, Vincent van Gerven Oei, and I extended the principle of this street sign policy, also replacing the street signs in districts with an Arab-speaking majority, we concluded, once again, that the concepts of freedom and equality within the democratic ideology represented a concealed policy of *exclusiveness*. Subsequently, however, the paradoxical promise of democracy — freedom and the right to difference for everybody — requires an unrelentingly consistent action, which, first and foremost exposes the *fear of freedom* when the wafer-thin mask of tolerance and openness falls away.

To return to the concept of iconoclasm — in this day and age, I would not represent this as simply the destruction of one image in favour of another but as a *strategy* in which a view or policy reveals the ideological contradiction. I would represent it as a radical *differentiation* of images that seem normative or absolute to us. The core of my work is the democratic ideology, which I choose not to regard as being elevated above ideological struggles but as their *continuation*.

The Japanese translate our concept of democracy as *democratism* — as one of the great many *isms* in this world — for a reason, and I suggest we follow their example in this.



Jonas Staal and Vincent van Gerven Oei, *Replaced Street Signs* (2008)

### Monument to the Displaced Rotterdam Citizen

In 2007, the Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA) (Labour Party) politician, Zeki Baran, called for the erection of a *Monument to the migrant worker* in the Afrikaanderwijk in Rotterdam — a sculpture that would be a reminder of the contribution made by first generation migrants to the rebuilding of Rotterdam after the Second World War. It was also intended to show that migration has contributed positively to Dutch culture, becoming part of our culture as well. The sculpture would further serve as a plaster over the still-open wound that the neighbourhood suffered during the first and only race riots which occurred there in 1972, as a result of the complete lack of support for migrants in society. In that year, the autochthonous population had quite literally dragged migrants and their possessions out of their houses for three days.

Ronald Sørensen, leader of the right-populist party, *Leefbaar Nederland* ('Liveable Netherlands'), reacted with anger to Baran's proposal and stated that 'on balance migrants from Turkey and Morocco have cost Dutch society more than they contributed'. He went on

to say that it would be more appropriate if a sculpture was erected for the Rotterdam citizens who rolled up their sleeves after the war, with a 'natural work ethic'. He evoked 'A bronze sculpture of a dock worker and his family, looking around, lost in the surroundings they were expelled from', referring to the exodus of autochthons from the problematic Rotterdam neighbourhoods to the suburbs, the new white bastions of the city — a monument to the 'displaced Rotterdam citizen'.

I called Sørensen about his suggestion and, after consultation with this politician, I decided to accept this assignment and had a three-dimensional scale model made based on his specifications. During an interview with him and Anton Molenaar, the *Leefbaar Rotterdam* ('Liveable Rotterdam') spokesperson for Youth, Education and Culture, I presented them the rough design. 'You catch me completely off guard with this, but I like it,' was Sørensen's reaction. 'Objectively speaking this design could serve all sorts of purposes,' Molenaar added.

It is obvious that Sørensen's proposal for the monument was primarily meant as a polemical move. His monument to the displaced Rotterdam citizen was intended to direct attention to Baran's — as yet unrealized — monument for the migrant worker, which is why he feels 'caught completely off guard' when he is confronted with a scale model that can be used to produce the actual monument. This doesn't mean that he doesn't want to actually erect the monument; it is merely the first time he actually thinks about it in concrete terms because he didn't take his own proposal *seriously at first*. And we, the audience, can also only see the actual implications of this policy when the image described manifests itself visually, with all its historical connotations, ranging from *social-realism* to the ideals for edifying the people that ex-Labour Party member, Sørensen, put into his creation.

### To Recapitulate

In the case of the *Stalinlaan*, the concept of freedom is used to conceal an essentially ideological struggle for the sake of the successful implementation of post-war democratism.

In the case of *Replaced Street Signs*, the exclusive nature of the freedom of democratism is visualized — namely, the totalitarian removal of all the differences that are not system-confirming in nature.

In the case of the *Monument to the Displaced Rotterdam Citizen*, this *exclusive right* to democratic liberties for the autochthonous Dutch is elaborated — the monuments to the migrant worker and to the displaced Rotterdam citizen engage in an ideological battle in the representation of history and *with it*, the meaning of 'our' acquired,



democratic liberties.

Instead of one image of reality nullifying the other one — destroying it — I would like to *realize both monuments* at the same time and have them cancel each other out: the monument to the migrant worker on the Afrikaanderplein with, next to it, the monument to the displaced Rotterdam citizen, running away from it.

Only *in combination* do they form the real monument — monument to the current condition of democratism, a monument that reflects the state of our political debate and the positions in it.

In the *public* confrontation of these images, from the space that is created by their *mutual nullification* lies the potential to find the terms of a new political and artistic freedom. It is this area that I would like to name the *political potential* of contemporary art.



Jonas Staal, Monument to the Displaced Rotterdam Citizen (2008)