

TO MY FELLOW LOOTERS

In the last two issues of METROPOLIS M, Anna Tilroe and Domeniek Ruyters exchanged a correspondence about engagement in art today. As the third and final letter in the series, here is a response from Jonas Staal.

By Jonas Staal

Anna Tilroe's article 'Who is Ringing the Alarm?' (METROPOLIS M N°2–2010) opens with a reference to the website of the glossy American art magazine ArtForum. It is a website where sparsely offered substantive descriptions of artworks and exhibitions are filled out with photographs of openings and the celebrities who go to them, the prices for which works change hands and interviews with artists about their relationship with their accountant. The website, in short, is a shameless performance of the contemporary capitalistic cult on artists with turtlenecks that cost too much, too many assistants and sponsor deals with Apple. The questions that Anna Tilroe asks are these: Why do we feel no indignation about how art has come to embrace capital, or sooner, how capital has gathered the arts onto its warm and consoling lap? Is the idea that art plays a role in imagining another world really just an illusion?

In response to these questions, I would like to posit two of my own: In Tilroe's formulation of her questions, aren't we first talking about a problem of reporting? Although the capitalistic value system is ubiquitous, both in and outside art, is it not true that an extreme longing for this not to be the case still exists? Why do we – both artists and critics – not assume this longing as our fundamental principle?

Where does the responsibility of the artist lie in this problem? What does it mean for the political agendas of significant artists, such as Teresa Margolles, Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn, when they are prepared to produce incredibly mediocre art fair editions of canvases soaked in the blood of anonymous dead Mexicans in slums (Margolles), 18-carat diamond necklaces with cynical inscriptions like Diamond Trafficking Kills (Sierra) and coffee table decorations of packing tape covered with Bic pens, made by underpaid art students (Hirschhorn)? Is it not the case that their social criticism is essentially corrupted by precisely the thing that their criticism seemed initially to be directed against?

If this were true, it would mean that being an artist, the way we know it today, within the capitalist system, is fundamentally anti-revolutionary in nature and, even with its image of avant-garde social criticism, ultimately does nothing more than reflect capitalist politics: that in the end, by selling the illusion that one could withdraw from the system, the omnipotence of the system is confirmed.

That Domeniek Ruyters, editor in chief of this magazine, in 'Politician or Civil Servant?' (METROPOLIS M N° 3–2010), his answer to Anna Tilroe, lyrically writes about a visual intervention by painter Marlene Dumas in the advertising section of the print version of Artforum can certainly be referred to here as exemplary: if advertising space is the place from which he asked 'if it is inappropriate and naive for art to still dream of a better world' (METROPOLIS M N° 6–2009), then it seems to me that the answer can no longer be 'yes' or 'no', but merely a final smothered groan from art criticism.

That he thinks this better world could find a way to go on by means of the symbol of the 'spot' as 'the enemy par excellence of our control society, [...] essentially indeterminate and uncontrolled', in the context of the fast capital that in its leisure time preoccupies itself with attractive spots (painting) as nice wall decoration, is beyond tragic.

As a reaction to both Tilroe and Ruyters, I think that it is first important to make clear that artists with substantial political agendas in no way whatsoever take that so-called art market, with the art fair as ultimate excess, seriously. In some cases, the artists around me whom I consider meaningful do make use of the phenomenon, but their serious interests are in entirely different platforms. These are platforms in which it is conceivable that money as a means of exchange, the state as a collective doctrine, and material possession as an ultimate objective can be replaced – or in any case transcended in our desire – by different, more interesting, more challenging and more existentially satisfying ways of giving form to meaning.

For these artists, concepts such as 'money', or the even more unsavoury 'labour', are in the first line of fire. Actually, the artists in whom I place my trust, in my own circles and beyond, are no more than looters of the system on behalf of a political agenda of their own that they hope to see achieved.

From this perspective, the excessive phenomenon of the art market is simply not relevant, and if someone claims that museums and other institutions allow themselves to be led to too great a degree by the opportunistic and meaning-expropriating hand of the capitalist system, for me, this leads to no greater indignation than when I see hoards of people in front of

a Pathé cinema, hear Lady Gaga claim Andy Warhol as her greatest inspiration, or when I wander through Rotterdam's Koopgoot shopping mall.

In a broader sense, the world in which I live increasingly exudes its own untenability. A short time ago in Athens, I spoke with artists against the décor of demonstrations and burning banks. I realized that – this time – momentum is being created in the form of an economic crisis and the radical estrangement that has resulted from it. Between the billions of euros with which governments and speculators cross swords and the actual daily lives of citizens looms an unbridgeable chasm that will lead to an important break. It is for this momentum, and for those that may be less predictable but will undoubtedly follow, that we must be ready, prepared with different political agendas. Anarchism as a result would in this sense be counterproductive, because capitalism thrives nowhere better than in a world without order, without borders. A revolutionary spirit – so history has taught us – is completely senseless if there are no scenarios already established. My essay 'Post-Propaganda' (Foundation for the Fine Arts, Design and Architecture, BKVB, 2009), referred to by both Tilroe and Ruyters, was intended as such a scenario.

Any such scenario presumes a bond between artists and the people. As an illustration, last year it seems that the financial director of the Foundation for the Fine Arts, Design and Architecture in Amsterdam rode off into the northern sun, family and all, with €15.5 million. What is important about this incident is not so much that it generated indignation in the art world, but that it did so primarily outside the art world.

We no longer raise an eyebrow at fraudulent activities of politicians and bankers, and in fact, we expect them to be their primary agendas. In the case of the arts, however, fraud touches on something fundamental: the bond that art imagines and expresses between people and the world. Few people would regard current political events (raising retirement age to 67, or not; removing the mortgage tax reduction, or not) as a moment in which they experienced a true bond with the world. Many however, would indeed point to a work of art. Ideals are expressed through the visual arts, theatre, music, poetry and literature. This bond, the connection between art and the people, represents the capacity for imagination in which lie the conditions for creating different socio-political and aesthetic frameworks. The promise that art makes to the people is that it will continually persist in imagining the world anew. The idea that this promise is intended only to mask the notion that artists, like the cartoon figure of the grasping banker or politician, would want to distance themselves from society by means of money is equivalent to an ideological stab in the heart: to treason. In my view, artists are at the service of the political, and not capital.

I would like to invite my fellow looters to share their political agendas with me – and the critics who remark on the consequences of these agendas to find more interesting frameworks than citing the ArtForum website or ad section in order to describe and interpret them.

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A SMALL ROOM WITH A VIEW

Simon Sheikh on Vectors of the Possible

In an exhibition at BAK, curator and art historian Simon Sheikh speculates on the possibilities of life in an age that has moved beyond political chaos.

By Gesine Borcherdit

The term 'horizon' conjures up many images: postcard sunsets and panorama wallpaper, Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* or Paul Virilio's theory of the 'negative horizon', according to which, in the age of simultaneity, we leave ourselves behind. *Vectors of the Possible* (12 September – 21 November), an exhibition curated by Simon Sheikh as part of the Former West research project at BAK in Utrecht, shows none of these things. The exhibition is based on the intense discussion between Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclao and Slavoj Žižek published in 2000 under the title *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. Here, the horizon serves as a metaphor for room to manoeuvre in a post-political age where neo-liberal capitalism seems to be the only option. Instead of bringing about progress and social change, politics remains frozen in an aesthetics of administration that resembles an endgame of democracy. Today's horizon is so oppressive that major progress and the declaration of new standards in the world appear impossible.

The debate on the potential for social counter-movements in this politically stagnant age, or, rather, on the question of how far away a horizon must appear in order for it to be politically effective as

an image (a bone of contention that in the discussion between Butler, Laclao and Žižek eventually caused the theorists to break off contact with each other) is addressed in *Vectors of the Possible* by eight artists and groups of artists. They consider the horizon as a politico-philosophical construct that can be associated with artistic and political imagery. 'I'm not sure if there will be an actual horizon line in the exhibition,' Sheikh told me in an interview. 'It's more of an abstract image that helps imagine time and movement.' His questions for the artists are: How does postmodern art work with the image of the horizon, which in classical painting played an entirely different role, until the moment when Cézanne abandoned central perspective? Can an artwork even establish a political horizon itself? Which possibilities in the future or past does a horizon point to, and how far are these possibilities removed from where we are now?

These and related issues are also addressed by the Former West project scheduled to continue until 2013, of whose research team Sheikh is a member: in panel discussions, publications and exhibitions, the focus here is on the loss of orientation in society since 1989 and the impact of this on art and politics. A conference at the end of this year in Istanbul will deal specifically with the problem of the loss of horizon: what happens when there is longer a position that opposes the all-dominating alliance of liberal capitalism and democracy?

For *Vectors of the Possible*, new works have been produced by the selected artists, which include Ultra-Red, a group founded in Los Angeles in 1994 working primarily with sound and performance, and the *Chito delaf?* group from St. Petersburg

that consists of artists, critics and philosophers, which has drawn attention with political actions and the publication of its own newspaper. But older works, too, seem to fit perfectly with the show's theme. Matthew Buckingham, for example, has contributed a manipulated photograph depicting Mount Rushmore three millennia from now: the heads of American presidents carved into the rock have disappeared, washed away by erosion – it seems as if American history has simply been erased. The history of a country that no longer exists is also the theme of the work by the Leipzig artist, curator and writer Elske Rosenfeld, whose research deals in-depth with the last East German constitution – the final horizon, on which work continued right up to reunification. She plans to pursue this project after the exhibition. Bureaucracy is also addressed by filmmaker and writer Hito Steyerl, whose work was shown at *documenta 12*. Her short video on the Universal Embassy is about a place of refuge for stateless people in Brussels: in the former Somali Embassy, artists and illegal immigrants came together to form a support organization with an adapted administrative apparatus that includes ID papers, a flag, and even a language of its own. The United States again features in the work by New York-based artist Sharon Hayes. In a slide projection with thirteen images, she is seen holding up placards with messages relating to historical actions, such as 'I am a man', a slogan from the civil rights movement of the 1960s. A similar degree of political commitment is displayed by British artist group Freee, whose three members are seen on a single large-format billboard: in front of a huge rock somewhere in no-man's-land, they hold up a bright orange banner whose