

Towards an Extra-Parliamentary Democracy!

Mariko Peters, Metahaven, Jonas Staal

Column – August 19, 2014

The following text was developed on the occasion of the *Beyond Allegories* debate, for which 250 artists, politicians, union representatives, university professors, dramatists, representatives from refugee organisations and NGOs, journalists, and students gathered together for seven hours in Amsterdam’s City Council to discuss the role of art within governance, political mobilisation and action. This debate was organised by Ann Demeester (De Hallen | Frans Hals Museum), Carolien Gehrels (until recently Alderman for Art & Culture, PvdA / Labor Party Amsterdam) and the artists Hans van Houwelingen and Jonas Staal in an effort to forge new progressive alliances. The text will be part of the DVD-book *Beyond Allegories*, a collection of the resolutions and videos that resulted from the project, which will be published this year.



Mariko Peters (GroenLinks) & Jonas Staal, *Beyond Allegories*, 2014. – Photo by Roos Trommelen

We, Mariko Peters, initiator of the Dutch Green Party’s [GroenLinks] legislative Bill for Open Government [*Wet Open Overheid* [groenlinks.nl - *Wet Open Overheid (in Dutch)*]] along with Vinca Kruk and Daniel van der Velden of design collective Metahaven and visual artist Jonas Staal, developers of O. (“ZeroPoint” [*Nulpunt*]), a digital platform for public monitoring of government, note that the state is characterised by a political culture

of secrecy. It is maintained by laws that facilitate its information monopoly and obstruct public control over its actions. We are convinced that parliamentary control over government actions is too limited and that the extra-parliamentary watchdog function of citizens and media should be strengthened by better access to government information. Further, we are dedicated to a collaboration between politics and art, as testified by our efforts to unite design, Internet technology and political action. Realising that power in an information society revolves around the access to and ownership of information and political power over the use of public means, we see that the structure of public society and the exercise of state power is based on the ownership and access to government information related thereto. In light of the above, we call for the following three propositions:

1. A New Political Contract: Extra-Parliamentary Control

We advocate a radical reversal of our current understanding of democratic politics. Instead of allowing citizens to periodically elect representatives who by consequence are placed in an exclusive relation of dialogue with and control over the executive power, we propose the permanent control over governments by citizens by no longer regarding information as property of the state but rather by placing it in the public realm. Insofar as democracy is defined by its relation to the state, the state is to be regarded as a cooperative. The so-called citizen becomes the first and foremost political actor – the political subject. We do not advocate a “participation society” in which civil society initiatives are an excuse for budget cuts, but a systematic power shift from the realm of democratic control by exclusive representatives to society as a whole.

2. The Transparent State: Reform of the Dutch Freedom of Information Act [Wet openbaarheid van bestuur]

A complete overhaul of the law that currently structures the transparency of information of the state towards the citizen is required. The current law is outdated and not equipped for the possibilities of our digital era. It is based on a paternalistic view of the relation between state and citizen: access to information is regarded as a favour, not a right. Despite developments around open data, procedures to gain access to information are habitually delayed and can easily take up to one-and-a-half years. Under the guise of “state security” or “the intimacy of policymaking” information is often withheld or censored. The legislative initiative *Wet open overheid* [Open Government Bill] establishes the right to access information and requires that government information shall be public by default, as the law requires. All public government information should be digital, searchable and findable in a public register.

3. Digital Platform

State IT projects are notoriously expensive, vulnerable to hacking and badly accessible. With a new absolute openness of the state, accessibility of information becomes crucial. Together with the Dutch Green Party GroenLinks, the Pirate Party, the Icelandic Modern Media Initiative (IMMI) and research journalists, Metahaven and Staal have developed “O.” (read: zero point), a mix of principles and techniques of social media and WikiLeaks, based on the notion of the “leaking state”. Making use of freedom of information acts it will become possible to create a public information arena where citizens can request, find and act upon information, while a maximum degree of privacy is guaranteed. This creates the technological design of a *digital parliament for the entire state, from national to local governments* from which extra-parliamentary coalitions can arise as soon as the parliamentary legislator extends its hand to the public arena by adopting the Open Government Bill. “O.” is a prototype for such an independent information arena: an imagination and proposition for the *state as cooperative*.

All other video registrations of *Beyond Allegories* including the Introduction and Epilogue can be found on this page: www.vimeo.com.

Essay by E. C. Feiss, [On Beyond Allegories \[onlineopen.org/on-beyond-allegories\]](http://onlineopen.org/on-beyond-allegories)

Salima Belhaj & Wunderbaum, [Plea for a Free Zone \[onlineopen.org/plea-for-a-free-zone\]](http://onlineopen.org/plea-for-a-free-zone)

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Dirk Poot & Foundland, [Mapping the Deep State \[onlineopen.org/mapping-the-deep-state\]](http://onlineopen.org/mapping-the-deep-state)

Carolien Gehrels & Hans van Houwelingen, [The Creative City: A Blessing for Administration but a Curse for the Arts \[onlineopen.org/the-creative-city-a-blessing-for-administration-but-a-curse-for-the-arts\]](http://onlineopen.org/the-creative-city-a-blessing-for-administration-but-a-curse-for-the-arts)

Ron Meyer & Matthijs de Bruijne, [De Democratisering van de Kunst \[onlineopen.org/de-democratisering-van-de-kunst\]](http://onlineopen.org/de-democratisering-van-de-kunst)

Ron Meyer & Matthijs de Bruijne, [Democratising the Arts \[onlineopen.org/democratising-the-arts\]](http://onlineopen.org/democratising-the-arts)

Mariko Peters was Member of Parliament for GroenLinks [Green Party] in the Netherlands from November 2006 until September 2012. Prior to this, she worked as an attorney, and, as a diplomat. She co-authored the first Freedom of Information Act in the Balkan countries and served as Advisor to the Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs. As a Member of Parliament her dossiers included Foreign Affairs, Defence, Public Administration, Media Culture & Copyrights. She now serves again with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Metahaven is an Amsterdam-based design studio founded by Vinca Kruk and Daniel van der Velden. Apart from commissions, Metahaven works on research projects on visual identity, such as as the *Sealand Identity Project* (2004), *Transparency Inc.* (2010–2011), and the *Museum of Conflict* (2006). Metahaven’s work was shown at Forms of Inquiry (London, 2007), Manifesta 8 (Murcia and Cartagena, 2010) and Graphic Design Worlds (Milan, 2011). Solo exhibitions by Metahaven were *Affiche Frontière* (Bordeaux, 2008) and *Stadtstaat* (Stuttgart and Utrecht, 2009). Metahaven’s book *Uncorporate Identity* (2010) is an anthology of design projects and critical writings. See further: www.metahaven.net.

Jonas Staal is a visual artist whose work deals with the relation between art, propaganda, and democracy. He is the founder of the artistic and political organization New World Summit, which develops parliaments for stateless political organizations, and the New World Academy (together with BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht), an educational platform for art and politics. His most recent publications include *Nosso Lar, Brasília* (Capacete & Jap Sam Books, 2014) on the relation between spiritism and modernism in Brazilian architecture. He currently finalizes his PhD research entitled *To Make a World: Art as Emancipatory Propaganda* at the PhDArts program at Leiden University.

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