Foundation 1989

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I was brought up in England, a country inside a bigger state, the UK, that had been an empire within living memory. Its grandeur, fading but still apparent in the 1970s, was part of my understanding of who I was and could be. At the same time, consciousness of class and ethnicity made it clear that this state to which I belonged could not be expected to care about me in return. There were economic and social forces that excluded and undermined any appeals to loyalty. In short, I knew that the UK could never be 'on my side' in the course of my life; a knowledge embedded in my posture, voice and gesture. The best that might happen would be a temporary alignment of interests – a light mutual abuse.

When I moved to a job in Sweden, I was charmed by discovering a society where people believed that the state was on their side. Years of social democracy had persuaded many people, even given them the evidence, to see the state and their identity as largely coinciding. Personal transparency produced a successful society it seemed, one that was content with itself.

It was partly the riots in Gothenburg in 2002 that marked a change in this rhetoric. Swedes were genuinely shocked that the global movement's demonstrations against the EU leaders' meeting was violently opposed by their police. But, as a foreigner, a sense of disquiet had happened earlier. The Swedish version of social democracy was intrusive in ways I had never experienced in England. This intrusiveness went deep into personal ethics, urban planning, physical movement and demanded a certain spectrum of relatively homogeneous behaviour. I also had the impression that this system of quiet social control appeared much more visible to me, an outsider, than those educated in the system. There was a certain attraction to a parent state, an idea that it cared for life rather than made living possible. In my worst moments of despair, it seemed to reduce bodily experience to the conditions of the maternal womb, with warm, double-glazed housing and clean linoleum flooring curving clinically up the wall.

In 2004, I moved to the Netherlands, aware of its reputation and its troubles. Naturally, I found a different body in a different condition than in Sweden, though a degree of the social democratic temperature was familiar. What struck me first was the survival of what I perceived as the 1960s. 'Letting it all hang out' still appeared to have some currency. Meetings were about telling people what you thought not building alliances, agreement was something given rather than asked. I came across pure 'autonome kunst' for the first time too, and a passion for authenticity that reminded me of the hippies seeking to find themselves in the high mountains of the Afghan trail.

Yet, just as in Sweden, my initial enthusiastic curiosity was inevitably tempered by some realizations that all was not well with the 1960s model. The political consequences of social democratic failure were obvious from before I arrived, but socially – bodily – gestures appeared out of scale. Maybe the lack of self-conscious identity was suddenly imagined to be a weakness rather than a strength and over-compensated. It is difficult for an outsider to understand it well, I think.

But one thing struck me as different. If the 1960s were still the benchmark, what happened in 1989 – the political and consequent social changes in Europe, South Africa,

China – seemed unacknowledged. What for me was a change of overwhelming significance, maybe because I grew up between two ideologies in some ways, appeared here to be interpreted as a distant event of minor actual consequence.

The project 'Be(com) ing Dutch' that we began two years ago has been, in many of its facets, an observation and research into just this question – did another era start in 1989 here as well as 'over there in the former east' and, if so, what are its consequences 20 years on? The discussions and art commissions we organize certainly seek to internationalize the question by asking artists to help us see ourselves as others see us, yet the question still stays close to its particular formation in this country. Looking at the exhibition after one month, I see artists who are almost always seeking to get to grips with the question of Dutch identity, yet doing it from their own position and integrity. This often means they look at the subject in a quite literal way, giving a flavour of ethnology to their work in order to confirm Jacques Rancière's crucial insight that: 'the real must be fictionalised in order to be thought'. [1] If this is true, then it gives a role to art. While personal and social identity always remains 'in becoming', the field of action in which they 'become' is delineated in part by these fictions.

It is the need to make visible what is taken for granted or ignored in the everyday through enlarging the details that the 'Be(com) ing Dutch' exhibition uses as its main trope. Its purpose is partly to fictionalize in order to think, but also to use the detail as a hieroglyph for the broader state of things – a device that is I think not so well understood from a pre-1989 position. In the 1960s, gestures still had a certain grandeur of ideological certitude, exoticism was exciting, difference (to a degree) an attraction. If that comprehension is used to read 'Be(com) ing Dutch', it fails.

Having gone through two-thirds of the extended project, perhaps Rancière's fictions of the real, and then on a small scale, are one of the few options left to us today. They give us the possibility to come to conscious terms with the post-1989 world without resorting to grand schemes and new utopias. The most worthwhile contemporary artists are often found ploughing slowly through the many surviving fictions of that socially foundational moment in the 1960s to find out how far we have travelled and in what direction. While all history is inevitably constructed, our collective historical construction needs largely to match contemporary observations. If it falls too far out of alignment, it generates frustration and alienation. 'Be(com) ing Dutch', which should then be seen as part of a potentially wider process that goes beyond artistic expression, tries to temper that frustration by zooming in on the details and close-ups of our imagined pasts, presents and futures. Such a focus is not particularly heroic, which is probably why the exhibition counters much artistic expectation in the Netherlands. [2] In this sense the project 'Be(com) ing Dutch' remains a modest proposal for a specific reorientation of our contemporary artistic condition rather than a grand narrative. The next step – configuring new self-conscious fictions for our situation today – appears some way off. It is, without any doubt, a major collective task, but the fragmented Dutch (art) scene is not minded to start such a project today. However, I remain convinced that it will become a crucial theme for the future to which this project will have made a thoughtful contribution.

You can find out more about the two-year project at becomingdutch.com

Charles Esche is a curator and writer. He curated various exhibitions and biennials, including the 2nd Ramallah Biennial (2007) and the 9th Istanbul Biennial (2005) with Vasif Kortun and Esra Sarigedik Öktem. Together with Maria Hlavajova, he curated *Once is Nothing* at the first Brussels Biennial in 2008. He is co-editor of Afterall Journal and Books, based at Central St. Martins College of Art and Design in London. Since 2004 he has been Director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven.

Footnotes

1. Jacques Rancière, *Politics and Aesthetics* (London/New York: Continuum Press, 2004).
2. It is interesting to note in this regard the thunderous reception to exhibitions of key 1960s artists in the Netherlands in recent years as well as the popularity of Pim Fortuyn, Geert Wilders and Rita Verdonk in the political sphere, who speak almost as though a return to those years could still be made possible.

Tags

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