The New Freemasonry
Appeal for Symbols Creates False Expectations

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Art critic Anna Tilroe's and exhibition maker Rutger Wolfson's appeal to art to furnish the Netherlands with new symbols is, in Lex ter Braak's view, ill-considered and gratuitous. Not only is it indefensible to presume you can prescribe a direction for art in this day and age, but the form in which the appeal to create new symbols went out was equivocal. The debate and the exhibition took place within the exclusive circles of the art world, and the attempts to target the public domain lacked all impact.

However hot the soup is served, a Dutch expression runs, it has cooled down by the time you eat it; meaning things are never quite as bad as they seem. The acceptable temperature is for the dinner guest to decide. Anna Tilroe's article 'Het grote gemis' ('The Great Lack'), which appeared in *NRC Handelsblad* in December 2004 and lamented the shortage of symbols, must have struck some readers as a soup gone so cold it was no longer worth consuming. But not everyone saw it this way. The article was one factor that sparked off a spirited debate in the Rozentheater, Amsterdam, it also prompted the publication of a small book (or perhaps pamphlet would be more accurate) titled *Nieuwe Symbolen voor Nederland* ('New Symbols for the Netherlands'), and motivated an exhibition of that same title in De Vleeshal, Middelburg.[1] Above all, however, it deeply coloured the discourse among art professionals around the country: Tilroe's essay was the talk of the town. Whatever you think of the article, it set the ball rolling, and for that reason alone it merits serious attention.

It is therefore strange to note that the excitement did not translate into critical disquisitions in the professional press. For once, someone writes a newspaper article that kicks up some dust, and serious criticism is out to lunch. 'Het grote gemis' has, as far as I know, not once been commented on in the national media. The exhibition in Middelburg was reported by the local press only, and the book *Nieuwe Symbolen voor Nederland* has not been reviewed anywhere. The weekly *Vrij Nederland* did print a piece by the author and journalist Chris Keulemans, but, since the book contains several of his own contributions, that article belongs more under the heading of committed fan mail.

The lack of critical reaction is disturbing and is symptomatic of the state of the discourse on art in the Netherlands. It is worrying because it betrays an indifference towards thought on visual art, and because the painful silence does nothing to promote the debate in society at large. Those discussions that do take place now and then are often left to outsiders who are able to score easy points with populist arguments. We do of course read defences of individual standpoints which, depending partly on the author's status in each case, may meet with either muttering dismissal or endorsement in the artistic back rooms. But the potentially wide public debate somehow never materializes, and the published scraps seldom amount to more than sputtering squibs that fizzle out in mirror-thin puddles. The articles, especially those in the dailies, are furthermore short and airily descriptive, so they are digested almost as quickly as read. Such light fare lacks the bulk

required for that endless rumination which is the essence of a critical debate.

The silence of art criticism in the face of Anna Tilroe's article is all the more alarming because her essay is no ordinary one. In 'Het grote gemis', she develops such radical ideas about the social position and tasks of art that you cannot simply shrug them off – among other reasons because she is widely held to be the country's most authoritative art aficionado. Views like hers merit critical reflection and declared standpoints. If it is mere indifference or fear of a rejoinder that lies behind the unresponsiveness, then no Dutch art critic can be considered worthy of his profession. Besides, as Chris Keulemans writes in *Symbolen voor Nederland*, Anna Tilroe 'is not paranoid and does not wear heavy horn-rimmed glasses'. She awaits a response, eager for the fray.

Normative Attitudes Enlarge the Void

De Vleeshal attempted to give that response by taking Anna Tilroe's article as the starting point for the book and the exhibition. The critical void which De Vleeshal hoped to close by putting on 'Nieuwe Symbolen voor Nederland' has, in retrospect, become only greater.

About the exhibition I will be brief: in my view it was a miserable flop. It was a typical instance of a cerebral infill exercise: there was a concept and there were works of art. The quality of those works did not matter too much as long as they clearly had something to do with the subject matter. And, as happens all too often, the exhibition drummed that subject matter in so relentlessly that it was a relief to be outdoors again afterwards. An art exhibition is not a punitive exercise in driving home ideas, but an unexpected fall into free space. De Vleeshal's well-tried formula of not only inviting artists, but showing work by a mix of creative contributors, failed for once. It seems Chris Keulemans already sensed this would happen when he wrote his piece for the pamphlet: 'How exasperatingly difficult,' he concludes regretfully, 'to make a symbol for altruism, resistance and courage without falling into the trap of history. But also impossible not to try. If I didn't have two left hands and weren't completely colour-blind, I'd apply to the Rietveld Academy tomorrow. I'd become an artist.' [2]

The exhibition's failure was the consequence of a misconception that also afflicts Anna Tilroe's thinking about art: that, as a critic or curator, you are free to impose your will on art, and that art will then conform to your own ideas. This outlook is closely associated with the modernist notion of art as a straight line towards the future which only becomes visible under the firm hand of the critic and curator. Tilroe eagerly aspires to the role of one who plots the course of art and sets its bearing. As she wonders in the introduction to her recent collection of essays *Het blinkende stof*, 'Where does the new, better world lie?' and quickly follows this up by deciding, 'Art is in search of a new, ethical awareness.' [3] These two classic premises combine to determine her outlook on art. Art must – wholly in accordance with the modernist tradition – proclaim a new world, and must – wholly in accordance with religious tradition – give that world an ethical significance. There is not too much wrong with this philosophical vision as long as it remains subservient to art. Maybe it excludes many interesting, indeed crucial, developments, but it does offer both the critic and the reader all the benefits of a clear-cut standpoint. It becomes problematic, however, when Anna Tilroe thinks, on the ground of her convictions, that (and this is the misconception) she is capable of prescribing the direction art will take. This may well be an aspect of modernist fundamentalism, but it has become untenable in this day and age. Both society and art have become so democratic that no single artistic expression can lay exclusive claim to relevance. Perhaps Tilroe is less militant than the modernists, but her views are no less normative.

Whether that normative outlook, without any shared basis, is capable of engendering good art, is a rhetorical question. In 'Het grote gemis', she scorns the *Burgermonument voor de Eenheid van Europa* ('Citizens' Monument for the Unity of Europe'), sponsored by the European Commission. This sculpture is the outcome of collaboration between artists

from various countries, and is intended to express respect for human dignity in the context of the expansion of the European Union. Tilroe considers it a total flop, and I cannot but agree. But this is not because a fluid is not a powerful sign, as she argues, but because the monument is hackwork. It is meant to portray something that is remote from the artistic thinking of the artists involved. They were told what to think and feel, and they undoubtedly did their best to make something of it. But when artists visualize their own ideas about Europe, as in the series of billboards on the EU in Vienna in 2005 (see also p. 64 and p. 66 in this issue), the result is immediately a scandal.

In 'Het grote gemis', Anne Tilroe implicitly concludes that the new world is farther away then ever, that 'we' are surrounded by emptiness, that 'we' have developed an aversion to the symbolic world of brands, and that fear is in the ascendant. Hence 'a longing has been formed for symbols that represent the values of the free, open society'. Without supplying arguments to support this assertion, she all too easily falls into line with prevalent views about our society. She offers no historical comparisons to back her intuitive conclusion and, apart from some impressionistic remarks about the media and mass culture, there is no substantial evidence for her conclusions. Never mind: the subject was new symbols, wasn't it? We crave after all 'symbols that are authentic, meaningful and inspiring' like Picasso's *Guernica* and Zadkine's *The Ruined City*. But contemporary art fails to deliver any symbols we can hang on to. It has become nonsocial and 'aims rather to abandon the existing, known meanings so as to arrive at new insights.' And that is not enough, for, quoting Jos de Putter, she agrees that 'art is no longer relevant to the social debate'.

To Rutger Wolfson, Director of De Vleeshal in Middelburg, this was the motivation to pick up the loosely-knitted gauntlet. He had already admitted at the start of his directorship to finding contemporary art weak and pathetic. Now he suddenly found public support for this outlook from an unexpected quarter and more daintily expressed, and it was time for action.

Lack of Social Relevance

Rutger Wolfson and Anna Tilroe invited a number of artists and designers 'who have discussed topics of this kind with us more than once' to assemble in the aptly-named Hotel de Filosoof and 'join with us in formulating values that could provide a basis for new symbols for the Netherlands'. The outcome of these discussions was to be placed before artists who then – like the makers of the *European Citizens' Monument* – could swing into action. But on reflection, 'the distinction between the commissioning group and the artists was too artificial', so the artists who were considered competent to devise the new symbols for the Netherlands were directly invited to take part. The account of these discussions and the essayistic contributions of Anna Tilroe, Chris Keulemans, Cor Wagenaar and Bregtje van der Haak make up the booklet *Nieuwe Symbolen voor Nederland*.

Has *Nieuwe Symbolen voor Nederland* turned out to be the signal Wolfson dreamed of in his introduction – the signal that 'intellectuals are making an effort to reassert their guiding role in society, instead of abandoning it to neoconservative politicians, populists, religious fanatics and the purely economic forces of the "free market"'? Objectively speaking, the answer to this question – considering the lack of reaction from the press – is that the signal seems to have gone unnoticed. Subjectively, the 'slightly revolutionary euphoria' that overcame Wolfson in his first conversation with Tilroe remained within the cosy circle of bosom friends. The bitter truth is that the whole project is a symptom of the accursed artistic mentality, a textbook instance of the very pattern it opposes: it has no social relevance whatsoever, it is a shameful exercise in in-crowd thinking, it opts for the safety of Hotel De Filosoof and the artistic sanctuary of De Vleeshal rather than more problematic, atypical places, and it addresses itself abundantly to an artistic audience which, with its pliant autonomy, can easily stand up to this kind of treatment. What it does

not do is what Anna Tilro dreams of in her piece, namely 'pulling art across its imposed boundaries, right into the heart of society.' The following will illustrate this, as a *pars pro toto*.

During the discussions, a number of values condensed out, which the artists were required to forge into symbols. 'Courage', 'resistance', 'dignity' and 'memory' are a few of these. The value 'unselfishness' made its way into three cities in Holland, the other values were showed as photomontages in the exhibition. It would be nice to be able to say they turned those cities head over heels, shook them up or raised a rumpus in them – for that would have countered some of the criticism. But the posters were little more than abstract messages-in-bottles bobbing around in the urban ocean, too thinly spread to catch the attention of anyone except the initiates. Compared to a witty fly-poster campaign like the familiar 'Loesje' posters, their visual – let alone conceptual – effect was zero. And it remains a question how people were meant to read the posters. Is the exhortation 'courage' intended to spur young Muslim fundamentalists to keep pursuing their goal? Is its purpose to encourage Rita Verdonk, the Dutch Minister responsible for immigration and integration, to stay the course? Or is it meant to pat the backs of the participants at Hotel De Filosoof who – as Jos de Putter averred in one of the dialogues – had taken such a daring plunge? The lack of precision, the open-ended interpretability, and the lack of any personal involvement or stake, made the poster campaign worthless. If the organizers had gone on a march from Middelburg to Gronignen bearing banners, in old-fashioned socialist style, proclaiming their highly personal values, and had engaged the public (formerly known as 'the proletariat') in their discussions in cafés, social centres and public spaces on the way – well, that would have been quite something, wouldn't it? Whether it would have been a good work of art is an entirely different matter, but at least it would have immersed itself in the social context for once. Art would have ventured out of its safe harbour to prove its worthiness on the high seas. But in reality the action was no more than an invitation to partake of drinks and light refreshments on a millionaire's yacht bobbing just offshore.

False Expectations

All this is more than just an unfortunate incident. Now that people no longer feel safe on the street, that lunatics and faithful believers shoot other people dead, that the media clamour for everyone's attention, that society is propelled by the over-revved engine of the spectacle – to pick a few things at random – art is required to . . . Well, to what? To fix the problems, to impart a symbolic meaning, to offer the one true alternative? Day in, day out, commentators occupy themselves with questions like these on radio, TV , in the newspapers and magazines. Isn't it going a bit far, if not quite insane, to expect these social issues be the subject matter of art, in the genre of late-capitalist realism? Shouldn't art do the opposite of that, shouldn't it give us the space to step back and think about our reality in a different way? To present a space in which symbols could emerge? Picasso painted *Guernica*, outraged, indignant and alone in the privacy of his studio. It was not until later that it turned into a symbol. Zadkine's sculpture similarly took many years before it transformed into the 'national' symbol it is now. We live, without knowing, surrounded by symbols of the future. Artists are working on them, and in the meanwhile we must take care not to make art the football of our false expectations. For they mask a cold indifference to the essence of art: its ability to be itself at any moment.

Lex ter Braak was directing Fonds BKVB from 2000–2011. In 2011 he became the director of Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht.

Footnotes

1. The debate was organized by the Lectoraat Kunst en de Publieke Ruimte, the Dutch Art Institute and Fonds BKVB. It took place in the Rozentheater, Rotterdam, on 31 May 2005, to mark the presentation of the book STIFF, Hans van Houwelingen vs. Public Art (Amstredam, Artimo, 2005); Rutger Wolfson (general editor) Nieuwe Symbolen voor Nederland (Amsterdam, Valiz, 2005); the exhibition 'Nieuwe Symbolen voor Nederland' took place in De Vleeshal, Middelburg, from 24 September to 27 November 2005.
2. All quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the contributions by the authors named in *Nieuwe Symbolen voor Nederland*.
3. Anna Tilroe, *Het blinkende stof. Op zoek naar een nieuw visioen* (Amsterdam, Querido, 2002), 9-10.

Tags

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