

2030: War Zone Amsterdam

Introduction to the Manifestation

Brigitte van der Sande

Essay – November 1, 2009

This issue of *Open* functions as an independent reader for *2030: War Zone Amsterdam*,¹ an event that kicks off in November 2009. Here, Brigitte van der Sande, curator of the event and guest editor of this issue, explains her motives.

'There is no audience, there are only participants.'

'I can't tell you what art does and how it does it, but I know that art has often judged the judges, pleaded revenge to the innocent and shown to the future what the past has suffered, so that it has never been forgotten.'

'I know too that the powerful fear art, whatever its form, when it does this, and that amongst the people such art sometimes runs like a rumour and a legend because it makes sense of what life's brutalities cannot, a sense that unites us, for it is inseparable from a justice at last. Art, when it functions like this, becomes a meeting-place of the invisible, the irreducible, the enduring, guts and honour.'

It was May of 2002 when I received a phone call while on vacation in France: Pim Fortuyn, the populist politician and Holland's most famous 'camp' gay, had just been killed, nine days before he was expected to win the parliamentary elections. In a leading article in *Le Monde* a few days later, a journalist wrote of a furious crowd marching to parliament in The Hague, suggesting that the Netherlands was on the brink of civil war. What a joke, I thought at the time. Granted, the first political murder since 1672 had turned the country upside down, but civil war in our chilly little country driven by consensus and compromise? Impossible! Just a month before the murder, however, the recently deceased cultural critic Michaël Zeeman had expressed his premonition of an approaching catastrophe: 'I do not believe in the spectre of an Islamist threat any more than I do in that of the Fortuynists as a xenophobic rabble. But it would seem to me that the idea of Dutch society being historically disinclined to instability is in need of revision. For by the look of it, there now is a nasty fissure running through society, a fissure that is only getting bigger.'

2

*2030: War Zone Amsterdam*³ is an exercise in imagining the unimaginable: civil war in your own city in the year 2030. A cease-fire has just been announced, and a group of international artists, theatre makers, filmmakers, journalists and intellectuals go out into the city to investigate what the war has done to Amsterdam and its inhabitants.

2030: War Zone Amsterdam names no enemies, provides no answers, but fires questions at a possible future. The participants occupy public space, infiltrate exhibitions, festivals and publications, or seek cover in underground spaces. *2030: War Zone Amsterdam* makes the concept of war, so abstract for the Dutch, specific and palpable by projecting the artists as well as the public onto a war situation in Amsterdam.

The enemy is unknown – for history has shown time and again that a former enemy can

become a best friend. The war is deliberately situated in the city and not throughout the entire country. The character of war has changed; it no longer takes place between nation-states but between ethnic, religious or economically motivated factions that are not bound by the confines of arbitrary national borders. But what is war like in 2030? Since 9/11, a few airplanes are all it takes to plunge countries into war. Will democratic governments adapt their military strategies and, as the American journalist Robert Kaplan claims, undertake preventive actions with small groups of warriors? What tactics will people be using in urban warfare by that time? Today's and future generations are growing up with Second Life, playing virtual games and doing all sorts of virtual training. What kind of soldiers is this creating? Do they experience the reality of war in the same way that soldiers who grew up in a mechanical age did? If everybody is continuously monitored, how can the population evade virtual and physical surveillance? Through what channels do people communicate? How and where does one survive all of the violence, what is everyday life like? Is there a public domain, and what is that like? Is art still being made, and if so, how do artists reach their public? The artists participating in *2030: War Zone Amsterdam* will not answer these questions literally, but take them as a departure point for discussion of the possibilities and impossibilities of war and of the role of art.

Permanent State of Exception

Amsterdam had always been known for being an open, tolerant city where people from different cultures and backgrounds live with each other without many problems. As an Amsterdammer, I was proud of our centuries-old reputation as a haven for the religious or politically persecuted from all over the world. However, since the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001, and the murders of Pim Fortuyn in 2002 and of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004, the mood in the city has changed and gradually grown harder; communities are withdrawing into their own ghettos, whether the Bijlmer, Oud-Zuid or the Bos en Lommer district. Many native Amsterdammers have become afraid of the city's Islamic residents, who in today's political reality are potential terrorists.⁴ We have even become so afraid that we stand by without protest while technical infrastructure is being developed that stores all of our Internet and telephone communications, our physical movements by public transport and in the automobile, our medical records, information about our children's physical, mental and social development and so forth, and keeps it on record for years for perusal by the authorities. People in public and semi-public spaces in the city are increasingly being monitored by video cameras for suspicious movements or – even more suspicious! – for standing still.⁵ And all of this is protected by a juridical infrastructure that in many respects is more far-reaching than the American Patriot Act of October 2001.⁶ We are living in what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call a permanent state of exception, in which the right of intervention prevails – that is, the right of the police to create order and also maintain it. Laws and rights are not there to protect citizens, for everyone is suspect. No one escapes the gaze of the police, who avail themselves of every possible means to increase the effectiveness of control.⁷ This takes place with the enthusiastic collaboration of the citizens, considering the success of the snitchers' telephone line *Meld Misdaad Anoniem (M.)* (Report Crime Anonymously) that was set up in 2004.⁸

So, in order to simulate discussion and get people thinking about their astonishingly laconic acceptance of the curtailment of their civil rights in the name of safety in the War on Terror, to get them thinking about the use of fear as a political element and about the direction in which we citizens want to develop our own society, this event is predicated upon a war in a conceivable future. Not because I might be war hungry or want to stir up feelings of fear. On the contrary. But indeed to stick a pin in the balloon of ease with which people in this country assume that the Netherlands will never, ever know war again because we are too reasonable and civilized for that, to debunk the assumption that war is a thing of the distant past or happens in a distant country. And to open people's eyes to a war that, according to some, has been rampant in Western society for a long time, not

immediately visible and recognizable, but proliferating beneath the surface like an insidious growth, popping up at unexpected places and unexpected moments.⁹

Representing and Portraying War

Anyone looking into how war is represented in the media and the arts¹⁰ knows that the strict distinction between the supposedly objective character of the reportage in the media and the subjective portrayal of war in the arts has in the meantime been erased. As is often said, the media have from their very beginning not only recorded but also manipulated images and information in order to increase the impact, to magnify the *truth* of the news.¹¹ After a century of isolation in the ivory tower of *l'art pour l'art*, many artists in their turn are using the media in order to relate to the outside world. Mediatization of reality is then the departure point, not war itself. Paul Virilio traces the beginning of this development to long before the era of television, namely, to Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, in 1818. With this painting, art entered the world of news technology. Not only was the inspiration for the painting a political commotion, the painting itself became a political commotion. The tele-presence replaces the real presence of the work of art, according to Virilio. Just like the daily paper that is used for wrapping fish the following day, the art work loses its value, its quality as a unique and rare object.¹²

What significance the arts can still have in the portrayal of war, in the portrayal of reality, is a question that has occupied me as a curator for years. How do we restore the power of the image in an era in which the creation of images long since has ceased to be reserved for professionals? How do you reach a public that either passively turns away from, or actively immerses itself in, the oversupply of spectacle, emotion and entertainment? Can we break through the appearance of things and replace the casual glance by *Sehen*, as Rilke understood it – the lengthy and penetrating observation of everyday reality that gains form in art?

For we are not only media creatures; not all of our experiences, thoughts and emotions are determined by the media. *2030: War Zone Amsterdam* is a revolt against intellectual laziness and indifference, an intense attempt to understand our present-day era and society. As an art historian and curator, I do this with the means that I have – the arts. Paul Virilio presented a plan in 2002 for a 'Museum of Accidents' as a response to the avalanche of natural and man-made accidents, mishaps and disasters that we are witnessing today. Although the uniformity of the selected works of art, many of which were literal and familiar images of disasters, made the exhibition less convincing than the accompanying publication, the intention behind it appealed to me greatly. Virilio did not stoically wait until a disaster occurred in his vicinity, he nefariously turned the situation around. Instead of being exposed to accidents, he exposes the accidents in a new kind of museum-science and museography.¹³

My exhibition 'Soft Target. War as a Daily, First-Hand Reality' in 2005, with 14 hours of film and video material, installations and paintings, was a protest against the 'shock and awe' spectacle of war in the media. With 'Soft Target', I attempted to avoid putting on a classical exhibition in the white cube of the Basis Actuele Kunst (BAK) institute in Utrecht by using a number of spaces in the Hoog Catharijne shopping mall in addition to those of BAK, with the goal of having a more open relation with the outside world. With *2030: War Zone Amsterdam*, I operate entirely outside the walls of art institutes, in an attempt to go a step further than the symbolic representation of reality in the – oh, so familiar and oh, so safe – environment of museums and art institutes.

Locations, Artists and Communication

The public does not have to pay admission to this event; after all, nobody buys a ticket for war. Short artistic interventions and performances will take place on the squares and streets of the city; the artists will also infiltrate festivals, exhibitions and publications, with or without the knowledge of the organizers. In underground spaces in the city – ranging from cold war bunkers and emergency tunnels to underground brick and concrete tanks for water storage when floods threaten – activities will take place at scheduled times in these ‘last’ places of refuge in the future war zone of Amsterdam.

All of the 30 participating artists and artist collectives, whom I have met during my travels to the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Canada and within Western Europe over the past one and a half years, have already done projects in public space and know the obstacles of working outside the white cube. Many of these artists, especially those from non-Western countries, are also curators and have organizational experience. In addition to seeking variety in the themes, disciplines and work of the artists, I have also sought to create a fruitful composition of the group as a whole, inviting warmongers as well as peacekeepers, worrywarts as well as optimists. Some of the artists live and work in war zones or former war zones; with their personal experience of war and expertise as artists, they will look at this fictitious assignment differently than will artists who are at home in the Dutch or Western situation. During a week of workshops and explorations when the artists collectively go round the city, a good deal of time will be reserved for discussions with the artists and the project team about the basic assumptions of the event.¹⁴

The conditions of war will be taken into consideration for all communications. What is available after all of the familiar media fall away – no Internet, no television, no cell phones? The group will discuss how underground activities can be communicated in such a way that they are difficult to trace and yet reach a large and varied public. For starters, we will look at low-tech examples from art history such as mail art and contemporary sub-cultural expressions like graffiti, but high-tech means of communication will also be investigated. The great mobility of people in the cultural world will be used for making international contacts and spreading news. A number of representatives from the general press will be invited to participate in the event as embedded journalists.

The results of the event are extremely uncertain. Will it remain a theoretical *Spielerei* for the few, or will it truly hold up a mirror to a broad public and get them thinking about their own position in a country that, according to some, is on the verge of civil war, and according to others, has already been in a state of war for some time? As far as I’m concerned, one thing is certain: there are no spectators, everyone is a participant.

Brigitte van der Sande is an art historian, independent curator and advisor in the Netherlands. In the nineties Van der Sande started a continuing research into the representation of war in art, resulting in exhibitions like *Soft Target. War as a Daily, First-Hand Reality* in 2005 at BAK, basis voor actuele kunst in Utrecht and *War Zone Amsterdam* (2007–2009), as well as many lectures, workshops and essays on the subject within the Netherlands and abroad. In 2013–2014 she curated *See You in The Hague* at Stroom Den Haag, and co-curated *The Last Image*, an online archive on the role of informal media on the public image of death for Funeral Museum Tot Zover in Amsterdam. Van der Sande is currently working on a concept for a festival of non-western science fiction, that will take place in 2016.

Footnotes

1. The preliminary research for the event was possible thanks to a grant for intermediaries from the Netherlands Foundation for the Visual Arts, Design and Architecture (Fonds BKVB).
2. Michaël Zeeman, *de Volkskrant*, 15 April 2002. On 22 August 2009 in *NRC Handelsblad*, author Ian Buruma also pointed out that Dutch society is divided into two camps: fearful Dutch and badgered Muslims. If this development continues, there will be blood, Buruma concluded in his article.
3. The initiative for imagining a civil war in Amsterdam in the year 2030 comes from Partizan Publik, 'a think and action tank devoted to a braver society'. They approached me in early 2007 with the idea of collaborating on their project, *Amsterdam at War*. Partizan Publik wanted to set up a virtual exhibition showing the effects of a war in the city in 2030 and I was to make a cultural contribution. We very soon decided to separate the two investigations. The starting point for both Partizan Publik and myself remains the same: civil war in Amsterdam in the year 2030. The title *Amsterdam at War* will be used by Partizan Publik. I chose the title *2030: War Zone Amsterdam* for an event that will mainly take place outside the walls of institutional art spaces.
4. For a clear analysis of the developments in the Netherlands after the murders of Fortuyn and Van Gogh, see Ian Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006).
5. Rick van Amersfoort, of Buro Jansen & Janssen, pointed out to me that standing still is the deviation and movement is the norm. Drifters, junkies, beggars, street musicians, and so forth automatically attract the attention of the police because of their immobility.
6. Gerhart Baum, Germany's Secretary of State and later Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1972 to 1982 describes a comparable irreversible fundamental change of the legal system in Germany in the *Tegenlicht* documentary by Alexander Oey, *Onderhandelingen met Al Qaeda* (Negotiations with Al Qaeda) in 2007. Politicians whipped up the fear of terrorist attacks by the Rote Armee Fraktion in order to limit civil rights, all in the name of security. The US Patriot Act stands for 'Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act'.
7. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 17 et seq. Also see the article by Willem Schinkel elsewhere in this issue.
8. In the first year, 100,000 calls led to the solving of 485 crimes. The daily paper *Trouw*, 11 February 2005. Also see <http://www.meldmisdaadanoniem.nl//Articles.aspx?id=203>.
9. This has not only been pointed out by thinkers such as Peter Sloterdijk and Negri and Hardt, but also by several of the participating artists independently of each other during discussions over the past year.
10. This topic was also the basis of my exhibition 'Soft Target. War as a Daily, First-Hand Reality', in 2005 at Basis Actuele Kunst (BAK) in Utrecht within the framework of *Concerning War*. Also see: Jordan Crandall, ed., *Under Fire 1: The Organization and Representation of Violence* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 2004); two contributions to chapter 7, 'Assemblages of Image', 'Action and Event', 79 and 81-82.
11. See my essay 'Truth and Lies in War and Art', in the catalogue *Signals in the Dark: Art in the Shadow of War* (Blackwood Gallery and Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga, Canada, 2008), 97-103.
12. Paul Virilio, *Ground Zero* (London: Verso, 2002), 48-51.
13. Paul Virilio, *Unknown Quantity* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), the catalogue of the eponymous exhibition in Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, 29 November 2002 – 20 March 2003.
14. The project team is comprised of Dyveke Rood (assistant curator), Rimme Rypkema (researcher), Hansje Lo-A-Njoe (logistics and catering), Christiane Bosman (communications) and Rudolf Evenhuis (registration).

Tags

Art Discourse, Biopolitics, Control, Democracy, Public Space, Urban Space

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