General

Closed Architecture. A Project by Jonas Staal Based on a Concept by Fleur Agema

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Jonas Staal, *Art, Property of Politics III*, Onomatopee 63, 2011, ISBN 9789078454755

Closed Architecture by artist Jonas Staal (b. 1981) is the third book in a series titled 'Art, Property of Politics'. The first book, which was part of the exhibition *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* in tent (2010, Rotterdam), brought together works from the art collections of political groups on the city council of Rotterdam. The second, *Freethinkers' Space*, was part of the exhibition *Tricksters Tricked* in the Van Abbemuseum (2010, Eindhoven) and presented works of art that had been shown in the Freethinkers' Space, a temporary exhibition space initiated by the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and the Freedom Party (PVV) that focused on Dutch artists contending with political or religious censorship.

And now we have the third in the series, a book that elaborates on and analyses the graduation project by pvv politician Fleur Agema done in 2004 in conclusion of her interior architecture studies. In this project, Agema (b. 1976) designed a prison model whereby the prisoner moves through a trajectory of four phases. She gave these the unambiguous names of 'The Bunker', 'The Habituation', 'The Wait' and 'The Light'. Good behaviour is awarded with the possibility of going on to the next phase and bad behaviour moves the prisoner back one phase. It is a cold and oppressive prison model, based on a mechanized concept of humanity, one of programming and conditioning. Not that Agema really believes in the possibility of 'improving the soul of the prisoner … but for the sake of the design it was more interesting to pretend that it's possible' (*De Pers*, 9 December 2011, 12).

Let me begin by saying – so that we have that out of the way – that giving a graduation project so much weight is slightly uncomfortable. Agema's texts, included in the book as a clarification of Staal's visualizations of the prison, are excruciating and awkward. One feels embarrassment for the ways in which she envisions and evokes her own model. For instance, she writes about phase two, 'The Habituation': 'The concrete is light-coloured. The spaces are separated by concrete and glass, the atmosphere is remarkably open, but very sober. I don't see any paintings or posters, for example. There are no communal spaces and televisions here either.' (p. 60) This is truly a graduation project: naïve, with little reflection, lacking experience and depth.

In various interviews, Staal emphasizes that he is not primarily concerned with Agema's person. Nonetheless, he psychoanalyses Agema at length. Staal draws a connection between her disorder (posttraumatic dystrophy), her personal development (declared unable to work as an architect at the beginning of her career), and her view of society. In his introduction he writes: 'In a bizarre way, the moment that Agema becomes trapped in her own body coincides with the design of a building in which she intends to trap others. … She similarly liberates herself from the burden of her disease by increasing her power over others by means of her prison design and ultimately her political career.' (p. 27) This

psychoanalysing is also uncomfortable, and in the indictment things too often wonderfully correspond to be truly believable. After all, there is a rule of thumb for conducting research that is comparable to the one for online shopping: 'If it seems too good to be true, it probably is.'

If the project is not so much about Agema as a person, then what is it about? Staal wants to use Agema and her graduation project in order to make a point about developments in our society that reflect the coerciveness and authoritarianism of her prison model. 'As such, Agema's work needs to be considered as a case study within the debate about the repressive society and the society of control.' (p. 31) The repressive society, according to Staal, is 'oriented at discipline, efficiency, and productivity, in which all non-corresponding, i.e. unproductive elements need to be purged. … Agema's total prison architecture thus fully coincides with this type of society, in which all aspects of daily life are fully controlled, thus excluding any type of nuisance.' (p. 28) Those 'unproductive elements' are not only prisoners, explains Staal in an article in the *NRC Handelsblad* newspaper on 3 November 2011, but also the unemployed or artists.

An interview with Staal on the website of the art magazine *Metropolis M* reveals that Agema's design not only stands for a repressive and controlling society but also for a 'segregated society'. Her design 'shows the contours of a model that starts from the idea of classes – phases – that keep everybody imprisoned in their own social circumstances. The first phase would be so-called "problem" neighbourhoods like Rotterdam-South or the Bijlmer; the last, gated communities such as Lelystad or Dronten.' With her design, Agema shows us a 'society that no longer needs a prison, for it has become a prison itself. Agema is an architect disguised as a politician: her artwork is the world in which we have woken up today.'. The interpretations and accusations pile up; Agema's design can hardly carry and support them. It's like a small body having to bear a large head.

That doesn't take away the fact that some of the developments Staal agitates against are worrisome. For example, the utilitarian mentality threatens to banish everything that is not profitable and not primarily market-oriented. In the Netherlands, we see this translated in the policy of the present coalition and the areas in which cutbacks are being made. The question is whether Staal needed to use Agema's graduation work in order to point this out. The multiplicity of interpretations, metaphors and accusations also obfuscates the whole. Agema's graduation project has become multi-utilizable, and suddenly seems to stand for everything that is wrong in today's society. The design, the focus on her person is distracting and bogs down the discussion in bickering. For instance, Agema reacted in the *NRC Handelsblad* on 5 December that it was 'terribly irritating' that Staal had 'stolen and raped' her design. 'That man is absurdly fixated on the pvv.' And: 'Staal only wants to say: look here, what a scary person.' Neither does Agema have to discuss content in free tabloids such as *De Pers*, for journalists are already happy enough with her open antipathy towards Staal. That, to put it mildly, is a missed opportunity.

The publication of the book was accompanied by a model of Agema's design and a film, which were shown at Extra City in Antwerp and in a two-day programme at Theater Frascati in Amsterdam.

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Tags

Activism, Art Discourse

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