

Issue 158

Work & Play

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Bik Van der Pol: artists as undercover agents



Bik Van der Pol and Peter Fillingham *The Kitchen Piece*, 1995, Duende, Rotterdam

Liesbeth Bik and Jos van der Pol have been working collaboratively as Bik Van der Pol for nearly 20 years. They both came from provincial Dutch towns to study in Rotterdam in the early 1980s and have been there ever since. At the time, however, it was a very different city; Bik and Van der Pol remember it as a cultural wasteland. Though Rotterdam had been steadily re-shaping itself after being levelled during World War II, it had yet to pour resources into the arts. During the past 30 years, the (art) world within which Bik Van der Pol manoeuvre has morphed – a shift that their practice has both contributed to and fed off. Institutions such as Witte de With, TENT, Kunsthal Rotterdam and the Netherlands Architecture Institute have opened and embedded themselves in the city. Dutch subsidies for art have bloated and contracted, creating a dense, though often stagnant, mix of institutions, postgraduate programmes and funding bodies. Biennials and cultural directives in the 1990s and 2000s produced a new breed of artist: nomadic, context-responsive and ameliorative. In Northern Europe in particular, discourses around self-organization, Relational Aesthetics and New Institutionalism were formed against the backdrop of, and to varying degrees of complicity with, social democracy and late capitalism. Finally, the public sphere as both political and artistic terrain has become increasingly contested.

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Throughout these changes, Bik Van der Pol's practice has spanned institutional and site-specific commissions, publishing, curating and pedagogy in its loosest sense. Their approach has involved a combination of pragmatics, politics and play, which are both a product of and a challenge to the context from which they derive.

Duende, the collective studio the artists initiated with their contemporaries while still at art school, evolved out of necessity. Rotterdam Academy had no studios and, at the time, the city was full of empty buildings, so the students found themselves a new space and demanded that tutorials take place there. 'There was no squatting', Van der Pol explained to me, 'we just got the keys.'¹ Likewise, prior to the formation of a slew of Rotterdam-based institutions in the early 1990s, there were very few places for young artists to show their work and, as Bik says, 'the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen was not looking to Rotterdam artists'. Forming the artist-run Duende not only provided them with studio space, it also offered them a potential exhibition arena. In 1994, they moved into a larger, 45-studio complex in the city's Crooswijk district and, soon afterwards, joined up with other Rotterdam-based artists as well as the Utrecht initiative Casco. The residencies, performances and discussions initiated by members of Duende were a question of both pragmatics and ideology. For them, a collaborative working environment, new audiences and contemporary art discourse had to be brought to life in the city. Projects such as *Rotor* (1993) – site-specific works produced in the building that were also visible from the street – or Duende's series of thematic weekend-long events, sought not only to identify an audience for contemporary art in Rotterdam but to create one, too.



Istanbul, 59 Locations: A Format for Nightcomers, 2007, 10th International Istanbul Biennial

In the 1990s, Northern Europe saw a flourishing of like-minded artist-run initiatives that were both socially aware and operationally savvy; concurrently, social democratic models were converging with increasingly liberal economic policies. This entrepreneurial approach, which was both pragmatic (the need to create conditions in which to work) and political (identifying a relationship with an audience whilst forging collective, sustainable structures), has run through Bik Van der Pol's practice ever since. In 1999, for example, while on a residency at MoMA PS1 in New York and knowing nothing of the city, they initiated 'Nomads and Residents', a series of regular ad hoc get-togethers of artists, architects and writers to present works in progress. The melding of the entrepreneurial and political came to the fore in 2007 when the duo wrote *Work to Do*, a manifesto that outlined their ideas for a new approach to working methods in the city at a time when property speculation in Rotterdam had resulted in hundreds of square metres of disused space and a city drained by over-bureaucratized culture. Their text demanded 'a

complete revision of thinking about the city as an economic and social model, through the use of its main assets: space as open source and users as prosumers – active, entrepreneurial and independent'. Indeed, ever since Bik Van der Pol arrived in Rotterdam, their ability to lead debates about how artists live and work in the city has developed in tandem with their practice.

'The desert-like situation of Rotterdam created this type of artist,' Bik told me. It is no surprise, then, that their first collaborative piece evolved out of their own working conditions. *The Kitchen Piece* (1995) was made together with British artist Peter Fillingham, the first artist-in-residence at Duende. Built as an exact copy of Van der Pol's own kitchen, which had frequently served as the setting for lengthy discussions between members of Duende, the work proposed spaces outside of the studio as possible vehicles for new modes of creative thinking. Shown at Cubitt in London, as well as at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam a year later, *The Kitchen Piece* provided a venue for informal discussions that visitors were invited to attend. It also returned to Duende, where Bik Van der Pol hosted a number of public talks and meetings over a nine-month period, before eventually destroying the work. Part of a series of repurposed readymades of the mid-1990s, *The Kitchen Piece* put dialogue and exchange at the heart of Bik Van der Pol's practice at a time when other artists were introducing more dialogic strategies for working. This was further developed in 1997 with *Sleep With Me*, in which the artists set up beds at Duende and invited people to attend an all-night screening of Andy Warhol's six-hour film *Sleep* (1963). Not only did *Sleep With Me* instigate a collective experience among the participants, it also emphasized the environment, structure and framing of the artistic situation.

Shortly after creating *The Kitchen Piece*, Bik Van der Pol again collaborated with Fillingham on a proposal for the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. *The Bookshop Piece* (1996) was to be a life-size, fully functioning replica of the theory section of the bookshop at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), which would be installed and open for business in the lobby of the Boijmans for four months. Bik and Van der Pol had visited London regularly due to their collaboration with Fillingham and, in reaction to the dearth of theoretical texts available to purchase in their own city, set about re-creating the stock list and architectural layout of the ICA's bookshop. The *Bookshop Piece* was the first in a number of what theorist Stephen Wright recently termed '1:1 scale' works – projects that eschew representation for an active, user-based and context-driven construction.² The piece was a sophisticated move, encapsulating what Wright terms art's capacity for having 'double ontological status' as both a Conceptual work (a proposal for kick-starting a richer theoretical discourse and its importance for any institution worth its salt), as well as the 'thing itself' (a bookshop). Yet it also reveals Bik Van der Pol's attitude toward the Boijmans: *The Bookshop Piece* made both the museum and the viewing public patently aware of the institution's intellectual and infrastructural shortcomings. Indeed, the museum's then-director, Chris Dercon, had programmed *The Bookshop Piece* to coincide with the first Manifesta, which was taking place in the city's art spaces, and with an exhibition at the Boijmans by Hans Haacke, thereby giving Bik Van der Pol's institutional critique a historical context. Yet the duo worked very much from within the fabric of the institution; rather than opposing or rejecting the museum's power structures, they made what Charles Esche described as a 'modest proposal' for the future.³

Public Arena, 2007–09, performance in Tallaght stadium with eight-metre ball, Dublin



It is this ability to challenge from within, or to act as ‘undercover agents’ as Bik puts it, that has characterized the pair’s working methodology. It also means that many of their works, which might at first be positioned as relational, find closer affinities with ‘New Institutionalism’. That is, the development of Bik Van der Pol’s practice was concurrent with art spaces re-modelling themselves, to use Esche’s term, as ‘part-community centre, part-laboratory and part-academy’. *Capsule Hotels for Information, Dreams, Brilliant Thoughts and Other Things* (1999), created for the Rooseum and later brought to TENT, consisted of a series of sleeping compartments – based on those used by Japanese businessmen – as well as a library, provided by Bik Van der Pol and augmented by the institution and visiting artists. Here, visitors were again invited to inhabit the institution (they were given a pass that would allow them to use the capsules repeatedly during the course of the project) with the artists attempting to transform the space from one of passive spectatorship to reflection and exchange. Critics have argued that this type of practice is evidence of culture being subsumed into post-Fordist models of working and consuming – both artistically and curatorially – ‘mimicking the experience economy of the real world’ as Claire Doherty wrote in her essay ‘New Institutionalism and the Exhibition as Situation’ (2006). I would argue that, at its sharper end, it is part of a more pragmatic politics that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s when practitioners rejected radical positions associated with a Modernist concept of the avant-garde in favour of teasing out new possibilities for pre-existing structures. By asking users of the institution to engage differently (either recreationally, by re-using the space time and again, or through treating it as a site for knowledge exchange) the project

created new collective and subjective experiences. In fact, exhibition spaces provided Bik Van der Pol and others with environments in which they could experiment with different operative and collaborative models at a time when the politics offered little else in the way of emancipatory potential.

Bik Van der Pol's work in public spaces was initiated at Duende but gathered pace as they began receiving invitations from institutions and organizations. This part of their practice has seen them push the strands of pragmatics, politics and play by extending the terms of the debate beyond the confines of art institutions. In many respects, this was a logical development for the duo, whose early conceptual and methodological manoeuvres were geared toward leaving the studio, and whose experiences in Rotterdam allowed them to realize the political potential of both public space and collective moments.



Capsule Hotels for Information, Dreams, Brilliant Thoughts and Other Things, 1999. All images courtesy: the artists

Art is either plagiarism or revolution, or: something is definitely going to happen here took place in Belgrade in 2007. Invited by curator Zoran Erić as part of the project 'Differentiated Neighbourhoods', Bik Van der Pol researched the history of the city's unbuilt Museum of Revolution in the Park of Friendship. Although the museum had originally been commissioned in 1961, construction work was halted in 1981, leaving vast swathes of concrete and metal support rods rising from the ground. On a summer's day, the artists arranged for the institution's intended footprint to be marked out using yellow ticker tape and for four camera crews to descend on the park. An invitation had been issued to the public to attend the opening of the unrealized museum, fostering a sense of anticipation among the crowd for an event that consequently never took place – or at least not as people had imagined it would. Drawing on the unique location and the expectations of the participants, the artists created a form of experiential and historical alchemy.

With this work, Bik Van der Pol demonstrated an astute consideration of what contributes to the making both of a moment and a memorial. They also highlighted the paradox implicit in the notion of a 'Museum of Revolution' – an attempt to conserve and commemorate a historically specific political impulse – by constructing a fleeting moment of collectivity of their own. In this sense, *Art is either plagiarism or revolution ...* (the title derives from a Paul Gauguin quote) similarly asks us to consider what constitutes a public, and whether it can be manifested or coaxed into new experiential and political positions through art. While still feeding off the framework of the

institution (or, in this case, its monumental absence), Bik Van der Pol's work in public spaces becomes a more explicit question of staging and framing, creating a space where the multitude is brought together and left to consider what isn't there. And it is in public spaces that the artists' projects point to different imaginative possibilities within an ever-shrinking ideological sphere, 'making visible', as theorist Chantal Mouffe has described, 'what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate'.⁴

Bik Van der Pol's re-imaginings of what constitutes a public, public memory and the potential of public space have developed in contexts as varied as the streets of Istanbul during the tenth biennial (*Istanbul, 59 Locations, A Format for Nightcomers*, 2007); a stadium that became the site for loyalist and republican friction in Dublin (*Public Arena*, 2007–09); and a rural coal-mining community in Sudbury, Canada (*Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, 2012). With all of these projects, the artists' research into a given place resulted in modest gestures – public screenings, scripts authored and performed by local children, a communal sports game, a day of performances and happenings – that sought to unearth a different conception of the place and people involved. Yet beyond the works' primary audience, films and publications often emerge as remnants or translations of the projects, and are conceived as works in their own right. Bik Van der Pol's editing and aesthetic is never uniform, dependent instead on both the raw material and the context in which it will be shown. But it is revealing that many of the duo's projects are known as memories or rumours, rather than through the films and books which they produce. And while their videos are often characterized by a documentary approach and unfussy editing, it is hard to discern any specific aesthetic that Bik Van der Pol would call their own.

In September, the duo launched the School of Missing Studies, a two-year MA programme at the Sandberg Instituut in Amsterdam. Presented as a continuation of the eponymous project that the artists co-initiated in 2003, which has included various collective projects, the course is conceived as a coming-together of practitioners from different disciplines (art, architecture, design, sociology) to re-think notions of public space, collectivity and self-organization through the framework of missing studies – i.e. that which can't be categorized. The course will see students spend weeks on case studies as varied as urban planning in the Netherlands or the development of public speech in the West. While Bik Van der Pol have framed it as an MA course, they see the *School of Missing Studies* as an art project – 1:1, we could say – where the notion of what defines areas of knowledge (and how that knowledge is used) is contested and employed. The course extends pedagogical lines of inquiry that have run throughout their practice, either formally through teaching positions at Dutch institutions or more loosely through research-based projects. The decision to conduct the *School of Missing Studies* as an MA course echoes a methodology that surfaced with *The Bookshop Piece*: namely re- or mis-using existing structures from within. Why create new bureaucracy when you can play with what's already in place? As with many of Bik Van der Pol's projects, the outcomes of the *School of Missing Studies* will be hard to pin down – but no doubt it will be driven by the same sense of pragmatics, politics and play that has come to define their belief in the possibilities art affords to think differently about the world.

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Based in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, Liesbeth Bik and Jos van der Pol have been working together since 1994. Their work is included in the 9th Bienal do Mercosul in Porto Alegre, Brazil, on

view until 10 November 2013. They recently launched the *School of Missing Studies*, a two-year MA programme at the Sandberg Instituut in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

1 All quotes from interviews with the artists in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, April and May 2013

2 Stephen Wright, "Use the Country itself as its own Map": Operating on the 1:1 Scale', <http://tinyurl.com/nvxv26b>

3 Charles Esche, 'Beyond Institutional Critique: Modest Proposals Made in the Spirit of "Necessity is the Mother of Invention"', in Bik Van der Pol – With Love from the Kitchen, NAI publishers, Rotterdam, 2005, pp. 22–26

4 Chantal Mouffe, 'Art and Democracy: Art as an Agonistic Intervention in Public Space', Open 14 Art as a Public Issue, How Art and its Institutions Can Reinvent the Public Dimension, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam, 2008, p. 12

by Nick Aikens

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