

○ A line in the sand

- Towards defense strategies for subsidised arts in a neoliberal era -

The arts sector in Holland is like a rabbit, trapped in a headlight, submissively witnessing its own demise while the new Dutch government is making dramatic cuts in its budget for culture. Why don't the arts play a role in rising neoliberal societies? Why do the current stigmata on the arts work so well? And more importantly: what will ultimately be the best defence strategy for the arts?

Tobias Kokkelmans in collaboration with David Pledger

Sometimes it's better to listen to someone from the outside. Especially when this someone has been experiencing the clash between the arts and the neoliberal project for quite some time now, e.g. in a country like Australia. I decided to interview David Pledger, director of a collaboration project between the Australia Council of The Arts and IETM (International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts). Presently residing in Brussels, Pledger has no direct relationship to the Dutch arts field. Nevertheless, he is very clear about the gravity of the impending Dutch budget cuts for the arts: "Don't think it's just going to be your problem. This will be my problem as well."

At present, it's clear that about 200 million euro will be cut from the overall cultural budget. Effectively, since cultural

heritage and amateur art will most likely be spared by this new government, the professional performing arts will catch the hardest blow. A cut of 50% over the whole performing arts sector is not unrealistic.

David Pledger: "Such a direct hit on the professional arts is usually generated by a neoliberal kind of premise. A couple of weeks ago, an interesting article in The Guardian pointed out the relationship between why the progressive side of politics supports art and believes in climate change, and why the conservative side of politics is suspicious of the arts and denies climate change. The essential component is the word 'change'. The progressive side of politics believes that change is a good thing, whereas the conservative side of politics resists change. It wants the status quo to stay as it is. Inevitably, when you get a neoliberal government, like your coalition government that represents conservative interests, it will try and dismantle the things which threaten its view of the world. The arts are a part of those things."

What comes to mind when you hear about the impending arts budget cuts in The Netherlands?

"What will happen no doubt – and this is understandable – is that existing cultural institutions will do everything they can to continue existing. I would imagine a siege mentality: 'let us protect what we have, so that we can continue to exist and try to resist further cuts later on'. So what cuts are then made within those institutions? Basically what will stay is the operating budget. The cuts will come to programming, and the first thing in line within that programming will probably be

investment in young emerging artists –the lifeblood of the next generation of cultural production. Cutting engagements with emerging artists is tragic for the evolution of national culture. You can't argue with that. In the next one to two years, those emerging artists will be looking for money for projects that they want to make, but the money will not be there because the budget's been cut so profoundly."

"Secondly, international cultural investment is probably what goes next. I think this will have a big effect, since the Dutch are so committed in the world to international cultural exchange. When I visited Istanbul a couple of weeks ago for an IETM Satellite meeting, the Dutch were a very strong presence starting up projects for the year 2013. The way I understand it, a lot of money for 2013 comes from the foreign affairs budget. However, if there are no projects coming out of cultural funds because of cuts, then you run the risk of culture being used to serve political ends, and non-politically driven cultural projects being curtailed, reduced or erased. This is dangerous for both cultural and political landscapes."

"Thirdly, a larger problem will come about: if it happens in Holland, then it actually has an impact in all of Europe. When one starts building a series of arguments against funding culture, gaps are developed which are very difficult to fill. The overhaul of cultural policy in Holland will inevitably affect other countries. All it takes is simply an opening in the way in which people think and value culture. And when it happens, it will shift quite quickly, because people will get used to the question: what is the value of culture? Until now, that question really hasn't been on the table in North-West Europe. But look

at Flanders: Cuts were recently introduced - perhaps not quite of the scale being proposed in Holland but significant nevertheless. It's a domino effect."

"So what are the consequences? Well, let's stay with Flanders. Internationally, the Flemish contemporary arts are frontrunners, in terms of how things get made artistically, the way in which things get organised culturally, in terms of connecting between companies, between cultural institutions, etcetera. The highly evolved cultural policy of the Flemish has come about because of a massive government investment inspired by constant lobbying from the sector, the excellent quality of artists and a strategic positioning of Flemish culture. And it has placed Flanders at the centre of many global cultural discussions which has given it greater prominence. Look also at other countries such as South Korea, which ten years ago basically put culture at the head of its economic development. And there is no doubt that this has helped the way in which South Korea is perceived in the world. That cultural standing has generated an economical effect."

How would you summarize that economical effect?

"South Korea is a very interesting example. And I think, to be honest with you, you won't find a more typical example of how a culture can assert itself globally. South Korea shifted its whole dynamic from the 'internal' to the 'international' through their hosting of the World Cup. From my own experience, it was a country that always looked inwards to itself. After the World Cup, due to a number of factors, they became very internationally oriented. They started to perceive themselves

completely differently. It was partly to do with the success of the soccer team, but also partly with the way in which that event was mediated through cultural status quos. This had been set up from 1997, basically after the Asian Meltdown, when all the Asian economic tigers like South Korea saw a drop in their economy. The South Koreans rebuilt their economy. In the process, culture became more and more part of the social and economic equations. The South Koreans could see that, in order to actually get people to understand them as a country, they needed to find some way of communicating. It wasn't enough to sit down over a negotiating table and say: 'oh, well, if you give us twelve million dollars, we'll give you this amount of product'. What they actually needed to do was to say: this is the way we think. This is the way we feel. This is the way we process historically and culturally. And the best way that you can do that, is by having some kind of interface with South Korean arts."

So you're saying that arts can help economic credibility.

"I think that may be true from an economist's point of view. The economic argument is: we use culture to advance our economic enterprise. However, that's quite instrumentalist and exploitative. From an artist's point of view, you would say that no economic exchange can get past a certain point without understanding the people that you are dealing with. If you engage through culture, your economic partner will have a deeper knowledge of your culture and you will have a deeper understanding of the cultures you'll engage. As a nation, you're able to develop the way in which you think about the

world. Getting back to what's happening in Holland: that represents a retraction of that way of thinking. It's not just a retraction of the cultural paradigm, it's actually inevitably a retraction of the economic paradigm. It's a retreat into the safety of one's own borders."

You mentioned before that questioning the value of art hasn't been on the debating table until now. Instead of asking you why people have started to think in this fashion, could you answer me why this question stayed away from the public opinion for so long?

"Very good question. Coming from Australia, a country in which this question is always part of the debate, and looking at many countries in Europe where until recently it has not been part of the debate, I would have to say that it's to do with the way in which capital – and its dissemination – affects society. The process of centralising capital into the minds of a citizen will inevitably displace values of culture and society. We're talking about corporatism, which in my use of the word describes a distortion of capitalism, hyper-capitalism if you like, and quite different to the capitalism described by Marx or the economist Adam Smith. I think that traditional capitalism basically recognises that it needs the agreement of the workers to function. In this idealised version of capitalism, basically the employer – the capitalist, the one who is going to make the profit – needs the worker to be happy, to be content to a degree. The workers need to feel that they are getting something out of it, in order for capitalism to function well."

Bread and games?

“Bread and games, yes. You need to be able to work, you need to be able to play, you need to be able to sleep. You need to feel good about going to work in order to be productive. And I think, essentially around capitalism, there is that premise where, grudgingly or not, the employer simply has to take care of the worker.”

“Corporatism, on the other hand – a central platform of the neoliberal project – breaks this contract. Corporatism actually says: the worker is no longer critical to the engagement. In corporatism, it’s the shareholder and the consumer. The workers are to be exploited, whereas the consumer and the shareholder can benefit. If that’s the case, then it is only ever about money first. The shareholder’s concern will be: ‘how much can I get, how much profit can I make?’ And the consumer’s concern will be: ‘how much can I spend?’ So if these are the questions that are occupying the minds of citizens, if the process of centralising capital is about displacing the cultural and social values in the mind of society, then that inevitably gets us to the point: why is the value of art in demise? It is in demise simply because there’s a change in the dynamic of the way people think: away from the social-cultural contract and towards self-economic interests.”

That also explains the downfall of idealism.

“Indeed. And I think this very toxic mutation of capitalism creates a very different environment than what was going on for much of the twentieth century.”

That’s interesting, especially because the lay-out for the Dutch subsidised arts policies, formed about 65 years ago, stems directly from post-WWII ideology. The idealism of subsidised arts had to do with rebuilding identity and values, and reconnecting people. It’s not a coincidence that in the late 1940’s, the United Nations came to the fore, or the widespread emergence of international culture festivals like Avignon, Edinburgh, or even the Holland Festival. The Dutch subsidised arts were a means of government responsibility of bringing culture to every Dutch region. A new mode of *Bildung*, so to speak.

Right now, the political climate is changing drastically. As a result, the Dutch subsidised arts sector doesn’t know how to respond. The known discourse of thinking about, promoting and defending art is being discarded completely by the neoliberal powers at play. They say: ‘it’s establishment and therefore bad’. The whole discourse is being put under embargo, hijacked even. And as soon as the arts try to use the old discourse, they’re actually underlining the flaming rhetoric that is used by conservative politicians.

“That’s very true. And really, the challenge for the arts lies without doubt in finding new language. It will take an enormous amount of work to try and find language that doesn’t put you back in the same place all the time. The across-the-board mechanism for the neoliberal project is to compartmentalise things so they can easily be identified: ‘this is good, and that is bad.’ Take George Bush: ‘you’re either with us or against us’. That’s actually the whole premise of the neoliberal project. This means that it takes the thought and the

thinking process out of everything. It is not about trying to work things out. It is not about democracy. It is not about the democratic process. It is not trying to better oneself. It is not about social improvement. It is simply about: 'we are good and they are bad'. In order to extract yourself from that playground, the discourse needs to change."

"Perhaps the first way to think about it is to look at the way in which meanings behind the words in the old discourse are being distorted. Don't think that those meanings can be maintained, because once you're being attacked you have to change your way of thinking. So either you change the words or you enhance the meaning behind those original words by inventing another kind of language. One of the ways in which you do that – but I think you have to be very careful – is to say: 'you can't separate professional arts from the community. You're really damaging community life by taking money away from professional artists because they are the ones that are going out into the communities and show their work, develop ideas'."

Are you now giving an example of a possible defence? The Dutch arts sector has already tried to defend its existence by pointing out its importance for the community, but that argument is just simply overruled by the neoliberals by using a catchy phrase: 'the common man'. The neoliberal politicians say: the common man doesn't go to your performances. Your art is bourgeois, leftist, nothing more than leisure pursuit and essentially bad. Although nobody ever presented a definition of who that common man is, he is already becoming a synonym for society as a whole.

"Then, before you change the discourse, you have to draw a line in the sand. And you need to draw that line because you need time to change the discourse, which is not going to happen overnight. The way in which you draw that line in the sand is to say: prove it. You have to say to them: 'prove that the common man doesn't come to our shows, because we have heaps of information that says that the common man always comes to our shows. *We are* going to the common man, the common man is us! So if you're taking money away from us, you're taking away money from the common man, because we are linked'. Calling their bluff is the first strategy. That will buy you some time. And then it's a matter of trying to work things out. You have to unpack what it is that they are saying. The reality is that at a point you are going to have to counter them with some kind of economic argument."

You think so? Even the economic argument is discarded already.

"Let me tell you about a study in Vienna in the late nineties. The Viennese council was looking at reducing the cultural budget, and they commissioned an economic study to basically justify their cuts. But the study came back and it said that for every schilling spent directly into cultural production, two schillings were created in the economy. It used an example of a mother and a father going out to the theatre: they paid the babysitter, they went to dinner beforehand, they took a taxi and they went to the theatre itself. As a result of this study, the Viennese council increased the budget. So the economic argument by the neoliberals against the arts doesn't hold. We know that art is crucial to the economy. Right now,

so much literature is written about it: Richard Florida's *The Creative Class* for instance..."

But then, also in the Netherlands heaps of studies have been made. Even in these instances, the neoliberals have their answer ready: 'fine, art might enhance the economy, but the art itself is only for the people who go and see it. Art is elitist and bourgeois, so let the bourgeois pay for art themselves. In other words: let the arts be privatised'. The effect of this neoliberal counterargument is that the voices within the arts sector are diffused and scattered once again. You could call it a typical case of 'divide and conquer'.

"That is definitely the neoliberal tactic. I think the power of the neoliberal project lies in the generalist discourse. It is using alarmist words like 'bourgeois' and 'the rich'. It's ironic that most of the people in the neoliberal project are bourgeois and rich. So, you have to unpack that relationship and then go back to them and ask if the teenagers that come to your shows are the bourgeois and rich. 'When you say bourgeois and rich: who do you mean? Because we have all these programs that go into schools and regional theatres. Are you saying that all those people that are coming are actually bourgeois and rich? And if you are saying that, then you're also saying that the common man is bourgeois and rich. So, what is your argument?'

Actually, you will find that there is only circularity within the argument. And the reason why it's successful, is because that in every instance, the language that they are using, is alarmist, sensationalist and designed to set off bells in the mind of the

public, which takes them off on a tangent away from the main argument. So our goal is: keep the public on message."

An important rhetorical technique used by the neoliberals is the anaphora: a repetition of phrases that will lend its importance from the repetition itself, not necessarily because it is true or proven. Wilders for instance has often used the catchphrase: 'this land is not intended to be...' over and over again. Without clarifying what that intention would be, who intended it or if there was any intention at all to begin with. What happens is that Wilders is using the same set of words over and over again, until it becomes a truth on its own.

"There is an axis of evil, there is an axis of evil, there is an axis of evil... Oh my god, there *is* an axis of evil?!' It's like subliminal advertising. The more you hear the message, the more the message is reduced to a single fine-eyed incontestable fact, the more people will think like that. I saw it happen in Australia. When the neoliberal project was at its height five or six years ago, the progressive side of politics had their speech and power taken out of their mouth. Because it has an emotional sort of force, to which the progressive side of society is most susceptible to. Individually, you're even going to question yourself: 'why am I susceptible to it? Do I actually agree with what they are saying?' At some point you'll have to go inside the mind of the neoliberal project. You can't just sit around the table with fellow progressives and just make it up. It won't happen like that. You'll have to bring *them* into the discussion. In listening to them, you start to understand what it is that they are trying to say. You can't keep those people out of this discussion. In

Australia, the progressives tended to use the tactics that the neoliberals were using on them: 'you are the enemy, we are not going to deal with you. We are just going to fight you'. But actually, you have to deal with them as human beings and trust that you are able to reveal enough of the humanity of all people involved. Then, the citizens can make their decisions."

Last February, just before Dutch municipality elections, the Ro Theater company invited spokesmen from all the political parties in Rotterdam to come and see a theatre performance. Afterwards, they had a debate about art. The spokesperson of Leefbaar Rotterdam – which wants to abolish subsidised arts altogether – spoke about how much he was moved by the performance. Right after that, he was asked if he thought this show was elitist, like his policy program stated. Naturally he couldn't back away anymore. He still tried, but the audience booed and his political argument was lost.

"That's an example of how to do it. You'll have to trust in civil society that people will be able to boo when somebody can't justify his politics with his heart. The neoliberals are justifying their politics with their money pocket. But when you open things up and when they speak from their heart, you'll see that there's this dislocation between wallet and heart, that there's actually a big space in between. All we need to do is to show that dislocation in order to reveal the neoliberal project for what it is. Which is not at the service of the people. Which is not at the service of the common man. It is simply a way of extracting more power and more influence for very few people. And the reason why they use language like 'elitist', is because that is how they feel about themselves. When you hear them

pick words over and over again, it's very important to look at those words and discover that they are actually projecting."

And that they are putting themselves out of the equation.

"That's right. They need to be called to account again, they need to be put back into the equation. You need to say: prove it. What do you mean when you say these words? What do you mean when you say 'rich'. What do you mean when you say 'bourgeois'? What do you mean when you say 'elitist'? So that we don't allow those words to be used for a fact. We are responsible for making the meaning of those words accessible for everybody, so that everybody knows what's going on."

Let's go back to what's at stake here. The new government will cut the 200 million. So in a way it is already too late. Could you once more summarize what will happen?

"If the cuts are as massive as proposed, then there will be a retraction of cultural production in Holland. People will lose their jobs, opportunities will be lost for young emerging artists, programming possibilities will be curtailed, risk will disappear from programming philosophies, and so the overall national culture will start to contract. That will probably be the first thing that people will notice."

"In terms of negotiation between Holland and the rest of Europe, I would imagine that people will make decisions based on the need for their existence, therefore a border mentality will develop and international coproduction will stop. And so, there will be less exchange, not just of artistic

practices but around ideas of policy, of the use of money, and that will effect cultural economies, the mentality of the artist, which in turn will affect the citizens, because they will see themselves less part of Europe. Which is then a problem for the rest of Europe. If the Dutch see themselves as less a part of Europe, then it has other implications in every way a country negotiates with other cultures: historically, culturally, socially, psychologically. And therefore that will change the way the rest of Europe will negotiate with the Dutch. From my understanding, that has been a very productive engagement. Always with its own issues, but generally it is seen as having forward momentum. If you retract or stop that momentum, if you cut it like the strings of a marionette puppet, then basically it is going to fall and become lifeless. So the risk is that neoliberal cultural policy will suck the life out of Dutch culture. And that will actually have an impact on the way the citizens negotiate their social and daily life.”

Some people are sceptical about the whole upheaval around the budget cuts. They say: ‘let’s be patient. Maybe we will face hard times for the next couple of years but let’s hope the government fails and wait for a more art loving government’. But will the 200 million ever come back?

“It won’t. There’s no way. If they cut 200 million out of the budget, it doesn’t matter if you get a very progressive government coming in after four years or earlier. They are not going to put that money back in, because there will always be a broader economic argument that says: the money needs to go elsewhere. So if the money is lost, you are not going to get it back.”

David Pledger is director of the current collaboration project between the Australia Council of the Arts and IETM. Pledger’s academic background includes Politics, Cinema, Dramatic Arts and Asian Studies. Next to his numerous advocacy and advisory roles, he is the founding artistic director and producer of nyid, not yet it’s difficult, one of Australia’s leading interdisciplinary arts companies producing original performance works, public space projects, play productions, installations, experimental video and arts-based television documentaries.

Tobias Kokkelmans is dramaturg at RoTheater and editor of Theater Schrift Lucifer. In Lucifer #9 he published “Huilende mannen”, about beauty and scarcity in *Orfeo* of De Veenfabriek. This edition of Lucifer (#10) contains as well his article about the Icelandic Theatrefestival LOKAL.

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