

SoS

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On the savage cultural cutbacks in the Netherlands

On Thursday 30 June 2011, a small majority of the *Tweede Kamer* (the Dutch Lower House) voted in favour of an annual cutback of 200 million in the arts and for the immediate reform of the Dutch cultural 'infrastructure' which, over the past decades, has been established on the basis of substantial government support. Where it is easy to predict some of the consequences for artists and other cultural practitioners in the Netherlands, we have yet to see what it means for Dutch society and economy at large.

How many politicians does it take to pull the rug out from under a national economy of art? Just one – to begin with. Geert Wilders, leader of the populist anti-Islam 'freedom party' PVV, has heated up the debate in the last couple of months – first, by proposing to cut money for the 'leftist hobbies' of the state, art being one of many (the European Union, multiculturalism, foreign aid, environmental subsidies and civic integration are the others, according to Wilders). Applauded for his decisive words, he added more: artists are 'profiteers', 'parasites', 'greedy-guts of state subsidies' and 'lazy gluttons on the public money drip'. 'Henk and Ingrid don't want to pay for your ugly paintings' – 'Henk and Ingrid' being Wilders' imaginary Dutch dream couple (no kidding); suburban homeowners with two incomes and two kids, ordinary folks who don't want to foot the bill for the economic recession, or worse, pay tax money to Mr and Ms Uncommon, or, even worse, to Mr and Ms Non-Western Immigrant. I tried to make accurate translations but my Anglo-'French' is limited. If we are to believe Mr. Wilders, he is merely voicing Henk and Ingrid's fury – or is it vice-versa? Nowhere have I heard so many people talk about art than I have in the Netherlands since the installation of this government in autumn 2010. People that detest art and claim not to have time for such elitist nonsense nevertheless have dedicated entire Internet forums to it.

In an economic crisis, public opinion ranges from 'everyone should make a sacrifice' to a straightforward plea for the survival of the fittest. The Dutch, concerned about where recession might lead them, are no exception. But it becomes exceptional when politicians take such a collective uncertainty as an invitation to use a calculated vocabulary of rancour and hostility towards a section of the population, cultivating a targeted anger on the grounds of an otherwise generalized and to some extent legitimized fear. Wilders, by the way, is not an official member of the Dutch government, which is constituted by the neoliberal VVD and Christian conservative CDA – a minority coalition that relies on the conditional but crucial support of the PVV (who demanded that these measures in art and culture be

made). Without the support of the PVV, this government loses its majority in the Lower House and will hence fall. In strict Dutch (and untranslatable) terms, Wilders does not support this government; he 'tolerates' it, which reveals who pulls the strings. Although the State Secretary of Culture, Halbe Zijlstra (VVD) likes to believe differently, he is but a marionette or ventriloquist's dummy, venting Wilders' fury. I've never been so angry at a doll.

Let me vent on my own behalf. It takes courage for a government to invest public money in art – a courage that I have often taken for granted. Am I guilty of a blind belief in state solidarity with the arts? Maybe. At the same time, I don't know any better than my government taking the same responsibility for healthcare, education, the unemployed and indeed, culture, as it does for, say, roads. State support for art in the Netherlands stems from a tradition that is much older than I am and is embedded in an even longer tradition of the welfare state, which partially defines who I am as a Dutch citizen.

Although art leads to something, it doesn't usually bring you from A to B in the same way you expect a highway to transport cars from one city to the other – as quickly as possible. Dutch government wants to bring the Netherlands from A (economic recession) to B (the closing of state deficit), as quickly as possible. Therefore, this government has invested 7.3 billion in roads, whereas long-term and long-standing investments (healthcare, education, culture, social security) make disproportionate sacrifices – all for the sake of the quick recovery of a nation that is afraid of its uncertain future, and sick of its past.

What do these cultural cutbacks mean for contemporary art? The state budget for visual arts will shrink by 44%, to 31 million. The *Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten*, *De Ateliers* and the *Jan van Eyck Academie* – institutes for postgraduate education – will lose all structural state funding as of 2013. So will Manifesta, the Dutch bilingual art magazine *Metropolis M* and a number of contemporary art centres, to name but a few of the afflicted organizations, many of which have international exposure. The *Mondriaan Foundation* and the *Fonds BKVB*, the funding bodies for artists and art institutions, will merge into a smaller fund that will have to allocate less money (35%) to a larger pool of applicants (institutes that lose structural state funding will have to apply to this fund for project-based activities). Fifty artists with 'proven talent' – it remains unclear under what criteria such talent will be proven and whether this talent needs to come with a Dutch passport or citizenship – will be eligible for state support, consisting of a

budget with which they can 'shop' (quoting Halbe Zijlstra) at the aforementioned postgraduate institutes, assuming that these are able to survive after their major sponsor, the government, has backed out.

I learned a few things from last weeks' protest against this 'new vision for cultural policy', for instance, that 200 million is the budget for five kilometres of highway and less than the state compensation for cucumber farmers, whose sales plunged last month because of the E.coli outbreak; the 7.3 billion invested in highways is 365 times the amount of cutbacks in culture. These are the kind of arguments you need to get fired up when you are protesting in 35 degrees celsius, but not necessarily the ones that draw your opponents into the conversation. What is more alarming is that Zijlstra ignored the arguments and concerns of his own advisory board (*De Raad voor Cultuur*), the Chairwoman of which, Els Swaab, resigned as a result. Of equal importance should have been

the expertise of Dutch private sponsors and art patrons – for whom this government claims to have high hopes. In an interview with the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* on 23 June, private donors of the *Stedelijk Museum*, *De Ateliers* and the *Rijksakademie* expressed their anger and concern, rightfully pointing at the high risks of doing business with an unreliable partner (the state) that suddenly pulls out of a shared investment. Their judgment of these plans ranges from 'short-sighted' to 'indecent' and 'ignorant'. In a roundtable discussion with members of the *Tweede Kamer*, one of them had already stressed that it takes 15 years, at the least, for the arts and its prospective private donors to adjust to an American system and culture of charitable donations, and that this culture of giving owes part of its 'success' to tax-benefits, something that hasn't been properly worked out in Zijlstra's plans. At this roundtable discussion, all of the invitees warned that a number of institutes might have to close their doors if these reforms are carried out as soon as 2013.

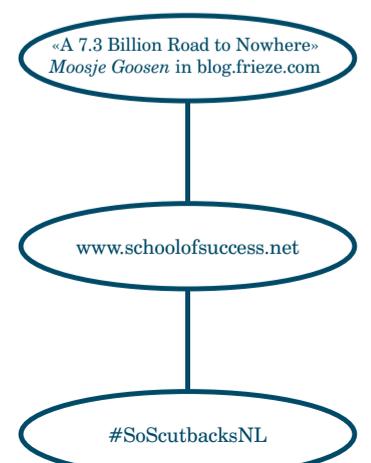


'Art Bomb' intervention at the *Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten*, Amsterdam. Friday 24 June 2011. For more photos of Art Bombs worldwide, see www.artbomb.nl. Photo by Roy Taylor

For a Secretary of Culture, Halbe Zijlstra has quickly made a lot of enemies in the cultural field. To my knowledge, he is also the first Dutch Secretary of Culture that openly admits to, and even takes a certain pride in, having no expertise or interest in culture. There is obviously more at stake than the loss of 200 million.

This government punishes the arts for the fact that the Dutch State has long considered art and culture a public good. That might sound redundant, but it is easy to forget that this government's rebellious anger – not just towards artists but also towards immigrants, intellectuals, environmentalists, the Greek, et al – is principally aimed at those who are held responsible for this heterogeneous company of 'misfits': past governments. Wilders knows well where the discontent and anger of his voters originated: it's been more than ten years since Pim Fortuyn campaigned against what he conceived of as an establishment of self-righteous bureaucrats that governed from their plush seats in Parliament while turning their backs to the ordinary man in the street. The so-called ordinary man felt heard, and has abhorred politicians ever since. It's also more or less the populist card that has been played by Wilders in his campaign against 'the Islam' (as he calls it) and the left-wing establishment that has 'supported, facilitated, and financed a totalitarian ideology' (quoting Wilders). Wilders is a smart politician who takes his voters' distrust in politicians seriously by telling them he hates them too.

Out of this condition, the absurd situation has arisen (not an intrinsically Dutch problem, I admit) that the anti-establishment spokesman of the people who distrust government has taken over its power. Therefore, Wilders, whose ideology is based on discontent for what has been, rather than on future-orientated ideas for what can be, needs to nourish this old anger for the old establishment – an anger that, with the change of power, should belong to the past. I'm not saying that this government doesn't have the constitutional right to implement change but it becomes pathetic when measures and plans are legitimized in terms of getting even with – quoting Wilders – the 'mafia' and 'thought police' of the left.



AREAS OF CONFLICT

Due to the coming cuts on the high education in the Netherlands, the *School of Success* explores and analyses the «agents» that take part and the reactions of schools, students, institutions, politics, economics and thinkers.

Some of this conflict areas are extended in several pamphlets giving different perspectives that can open a dialogue on the possible consequences and future development of the high education.



SCHOOL

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Richard Keeble

Professor at Lincoln School of Journalism

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NEW EDUCATION SYSTEMS