

Tools with potential

For sure art can be a tool to produce discourse. Yet, discourse in art exists under the conditions of art, that is always also transposed to the key of fiction, framed as an allegory and suspended in a 'what if' scenario. Remember Marcel Broothaers 'Museum of Eagles': a model of how the museum works and not a working museum, a tableau vivant of an artspace that suspends its own reality and thereby creates a site of potentiality.

Bik van der Pol continuously operate in this contested field between the actuality of discourse production and the potentiality of the model. Take the *Bookshop piece* for example: Together with Peter Fillingham Bik van der Pol installed an exact replica of the bookshop of the Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) in London at the Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam in 1996. The replica stocked and sold the same selection of books on art and critical theory as the original. So the piece gave actual access to a body of critical thought. At the same time it was a conceptual gesture: a scenario proposed as a model of how critical theory could be disseminated in the art context, an allegory of discourse production in art and in this sense figure of potentiality.

As a an allegory the piece raised the question: What does theory represent in art? Asked about the relation the pioneers of Conceptualism had to theory, Mel Ramsden of Art and Language (on a conference at the ICA in 1995) replied that this relation was defined by the fact that there was one book by Wittgenstein in the local library and Joseph Kosuth had borrowed it first. Basic matters of actual access to theory obviously made a difference. But the anecdote also underscores the *theatricality of the theoretical* in conceptual art: To be the first to borrow a book by Wittgenstein is a symbolic gesture through which the role of the artist is reconfigured as that of a reader of theory. To present a theory bookshop as a piece of art therefore also means to highlight the symbolic status of theory books as *tokens* of the commitment of conceptual artists to experiment with the potentials of the intellectual stance. This symbolic transfiguration of reality into a (role-)model is a significant gesture. For it is precisely when a new image of what art could potentially be is projected, that an actual practice can emerge.

While a model can help to instigate new forms of art, it can equally be a tool to expose and challenge the conditions of existing practices. Founded in New York in 1999 the project *Nomads & Residents* is such a tool for renegotiating the conditions under which people live, work and bond when they circulate within the international art world as itinerant producers. It is a symbolic framework for an ongoing series of events Bik Van der Pol host together with collaborators in different cities. They bring visiting and local artists together to facilitate the exchange of ideas and discuss the conditions of cultural production in different contexts. The political twist of *Nomads & Residents* is a decisive shift of attitude: Instead of passively accepting existing structures, Bik Van der Pol have created a framework for themselves and others to actively address and transform them. To formalize an informal communication - by framing it as art - becomes a technique to create a community that convenes to address its own conditions. It is a tool to approach the situation you find yourself in learn how to inhabit it together with others.

Together with Korteknie & Stuhlmacher architects Bik Van der Pol then realised *Nomads in Residence / No. 19* in 2004 and designed a studio building for an artists residency program in the Leidse Rijn near Utrecht (an urban development which is partly still under construction and known for its progressive architecture). For the studio industrial containers were used as modular building blocks; the architecture is flexible as walls opens like doors can be collapsed to form a stage. The project actualizes the potentials of a conceptual practice in a physical structure. At the same time, however, the simple fact that *Nomads in Residence / No. 19* is not just a

piece of architecture but also a conceptual artwork changes the very nature of the building: it becomes a model, an exemplary structure that demonstrates the potential of taking the definition of the conditions of production into your own hands.

A similarly provocative rift between actuality and potentiality was opened up by the project *Absolut Stockholm, Label or life – city on a platform* (2000). In the Moderna Museet project space in Stockholm Bik Van der Pol reconstructed a billboard they had come across in New York. It was part of an advertisement campaign in which Absolut Vodka and Ikea had conjointly promoted their products under the banner of Swedish culture. Various pieces of actual Ikea furniture were fixed onto the billboard to form the outlines of an Absolut Vodka bottle. The Slogan ran 'Absolut New York'. Bik Van der Pol rebuilt the structure and sprayed the name 'Stockholm' across the words New York in red letters. Had the ad before addressed the public of New York with a message from and about Sweden, this message was now re-addressed to the public of Stockholm. To picture the uncanny effect of this reverse displacement, imagine a letter you never wrote was delivered to you with the notice 'Return to Sender'. Bik Van der Pol thus turned the billboard into a message in search for a missing addressee: in whose name do Ikea and Absolut formulate their model of Swedish society and what does it stand for?

In this exhibition Bik Van der Pol also launched a series of events that explored what the 'Swedish model' had stood for in the past. Guided tours were organized to cultural centers and housing projects around Stockholm, which epitomize the progressive communal culture of the Seventies and have visibly suffered under its gradual erosion. Commemorating what was lost, the visits at the same time temporarily reactivated the historical sites to revive a sense of their unfulfilled potential. By staging a clash between two variants of the Swedish model - the old social democratic and the new capitalist - Bik Van der Pol raised the question in the name of which principles the society constitutes itself as a cultural community.

In their practice Bik Van der Pol thus explore the possibilities of using the model as a medium. They employ the model to show how the role and agency of the artist could be reinterpreted (e.g. as a reader of books or member of the community of nomads and residents). At the same time they use the model as a medium to expose and question existing paradigms of social identity (e.g. by framing different incarnations of the Swedish model). In some cases the potentials of the model are actualized by a community (e.g. by the nomads in residence), in all cases however the model prepares a ground for discourse and awaits to be activated by anyone who understands it as a tool with potential.

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