

Review Article

If We Are, Indeed, All 'Embedded', Then What to Do Next? A Review of BAVO's *Too Active to Act*.

Isabelle Doucet

I have chosen to start this review of BAVO's *Too Active to Act*, *Cultureel Activisme na het Einde van de Geschiedenis* (Valiz, 2010), with the book's conclusion, titled: 'Embedded or not? That is explicitly not the question!'¹ Indeed, recent debates, also in architecture, have proposed a focus on practice as a locus for critical action, and thus propose a form of social engagement that is situated and embedded in the real. Such embedded action is then seen as more hands-on than theories and ideologies merely reflecting on the real, from a (safe) distance. In addition, it is seen as more efficient in its transformative power than the avant-garde techniques of negation and subversion. In other words, to be embedded or not is, indeed, no longer the question as there seems to be a consensus on the importance of critical action through practice and through a direct engagement with the real. However, as numerous debates show, there remains vigorous disagreement on how then to process, shape, evaluate, and safeguard such (critical) engagement through practice.² Moreover, much of that discussion still unfolds around rather artificial fault lines, such as between a critical theory and projective practice.³

Too Active to Act offers an uncompromising, polemic critique of the current status of socially engaged cultural practice, with a specific focus on the Netherlands. But it also promises to offer alternative proposals for more politicized cultural strategies,⁴ which it delivers, albeit without further elaboration. It is tempting to condemn such an unkept promise for it leaves unaddressed the

question of whether it is not crucial to work out the subtleties and detailed workings of such alternatives precisely in a practice-based context. Should a convincing, realistic alternative not sprout from a careful empirical analysis of the very details of what composes and moulds a *critique-from-within*? Does it suffice to simply showcase presumably well-proven, 'forgotten' avant-garde techniques such as over-identification or sabotage? But the question that should perhaps occupy us more is whether BAVO's attempt to give a different account of the Dutch cultural activist landscape is not the achievement in itself.

Too Active to Act starts from two observations. Firstly, from the observation that, despite the proclamation of a demise in the belief in a perfect, or at least better, society by 'the end of history' (following Fukuyama), recent cultural production and activism in the Netherlands has demonstrated that there is, in fact, an abundance of socially engaged cultural production. Secondly, it starts from the observation that such production has become highly problematic in terms of the genuineness and radicalism of its critical project.

The first part of the book offers an analysis of this problematic state of the cultural landscape by unravelling its main deficit, namely the process of depoliticization of cultural activism. In a whirlwind kind of way, this first part runs through the several aspects that occur in this depoliticization process. It refers, for example, to the typically

modest approach of such practices. Indeed, as I have also observed in contexts other than the Dutch, such practices are wary of imposing themselves too much and have given up the belief that a radically different society that overthrows the existing one can actually be enforced. BAVO argues that cultural practice has not just become more modest in its impact and approach, but also - and this is, of course, one of BAVO's major concerns - 'smoother' in its disturbances. Such 'smoothness' becomes perhaps most obscene when applied to the integration of 'the other' or 'the marginal' in cultural practice; and BAVO refers to this problem on several occasions throughout the book. Indeed, it has meanwhile become obvious how cultural, artistic, or social practices lend themselves quite handily to enhancing 'the other' and 'the margin' as a productive force and/or location for action. And this, of course, is part of a larger phenomenon, particularly in urban regeneration contexts, where the margins are transformed into new centres, as a key component of a global urban money-making machine. In that sense, I agree with BAVO in that a perspective from the margins becomes problematic when it adopts a pragmatic approach that ultimately suits the market economy it opposes. One of neo-liberalism's remarkable achievements is its capacity to draw even the most marginal of the margins, 'the other', and the subjugated, into the very centre of its operations.⁵ In addition, the meanwhile well-studied side-effects of (neo-liberal) urban renaissance - such as gentrification, social displacement, privatization and homogenization of the public domain - are then dealt with through so-called glocal measures and compensations (community services, participation, planning 'for the people') that often prove either highly inefficient or are waved away by the hopeful expectation that good planning can keep such effects to a minimum. Such situations are then often perceived as 'hegemonic' in the sense that there is presumably no longer an outside from which one can look onto, and radically oppose, the centre. Also the practices, as described by BAVO,

seem to operate (at least to a certain extent) *within* the established order, while claiming to intervene critically in the presumable margins of that order. In line with BAVO, I am wary of the rather perverse situation wherein activists think (or hope) they are empowering the margin, while in fact all they (can) do is to appease, make more bearable, and, thus, accept, the side-effects of the established order.

However, as an alternative to both such an uncritical (or naïve) embracing of the margin and a sheer fatalism that nothing can be done anyway, I suggest revising the meaning of being 'marginal' *within* the system, namely those instances where the established status quo is challenged from within. Such an approach, I believe, can be found in Isabelle Stengers' attention to the 'interstice' and in Donna Haraway's subjugated viewpoints.

With 'interstice', Stengers refers to an attempt to grasp what is lurking in the interstices, or the 'cracks' in the existing situation; what, precisely, 'escapes description' because we simply do not (yet) have the words that allow us to describe what has not yet been stabilized.⁶ It is not about acting from the margins, as the cultural producers do, but it is about allowing events to emerge from those interstices. And because an event is, in Stengers' definition, 'something [we] can hope for but cannot master or decide',⁷ interstices allow transformation (through the articulation of an event), albeit without guaranteeing it. Thus, whereas the cultural producers, as described by BAVO, still seem to hold on to mechanisms of control and orchestration in order to guarantee impact, it is precisely by letting go of control that change can occur. Likewise, Donna Haraway has warned us that subjugated viewpoints (bottom-up, everyday based, marginal) are not unproblematic because no matter how weak, oppressed, or underground, the 'standpoints of the subjugated are not "innocent" positions' and because it is not clear at all *how* to see from below.⁸ Whereas Stengers refuses to *fix* the interstice (and

surely not *outside* the centre), Haraway proposes a commitment to 'mobile positioning' combined with 'passionate detachment' (rather than distance or complacent critique).⁹ The question for Haraway is *how* to see from below, and thus actually put positioning, location, and perspective at stake. For Stengers and Haraway, it is a matter not so much of better, ideal, fixed solutions, but of aiming at 'better accounts of the world'.¹⁰ I believe that, by letting go of the margin as the already established and recognized 'other', and by avoiding an overly enthusiastic embracing of those established margins, one could allow that which is the 'other', not yet defined or describable, to emerge, to take shape. An openly admitted positioning 'from within' (from the interstice or subjugated viewpoints) as such allows for different accounts, for different takes on the situation. If we know that, in fact, *any* project or intervention is transformative by nature, but that this does not necessarily imply also a *critical* transformation, then the challenge is no longer to find and empower margins, but to develop ways to become attentive to events that emerge from the cracks, and to develop modes to define whether or not such events transform, question, and challenge the established status quo.

One could argue that, to a certain extent, *Too Active to Act* aims to do precisely that: give a different account of the Dutch cultural landscape, not as much by unmasking some hidden powers and corruptions, but by exposing the various components of the process of depoliticization that are arguably part of it. In a rather erratic, fragmented yet invigorating manner, and by means of numerous examples, it brings key elements to the fore that I read in terms of: more realism; (radical) pragmatism; a bottom-up, action-driven, 'work-floor' approach; an aversion to theory; a flight from responsibility; and the fact that all those devices used by cultural activism are as much enhanced by the political as by the economic establishment.

The second part of the book, as polemical and fragmented as the first, aims to discuss the possibilities of alternative forms of critique, referring to examples such as the technique of over-identification rather than subversion.¹¹ Towards the end of the book, BAVO expresses loudly and clearly its dissatisfaction with cultural production: because so-called radical pragmatism is not as radical as we think it is, which has to do, I would argue, with the fact that such practices struggle to balance a critical distance with an efficiency that seemingly requires a degree of complacency with their struggle to avoid compromising their radicalism while being immersed in the real. Only in the conclusion of the book do we get a glimpse of BAVO's suggestion for a 'way out', but this 'alternative' project remains rather vague. Solutions remain limited to the introduction of two examples of the method of over-identification. A first case in point is Michael Moore's documentary style as an example of 'progressive cultural terror'.¹² This refers to the activist not being afraid to take a standpoint that is 'inhuman' and to use unorthodox means and strategies - such as overtly defending or over-identifying with the ideas of the enemy - as a means of exposing the enemy's difficulties to adhere to his own ideals once confronted with the consequences in practice.¹³ A second example of over-identification is *Bitte liebt Oesterreich*, a Big Brother show by theatre maker Christoph Schlingensiefel, in which asylum seekers are literally voted away - a project as a reaction against Haider's election in 2000. BAVO sees the possibility of a 'different standpoint'¹⁴ in terms of using one's creative expertise to push the project of the enemy through even harder and more consequently than he himself is prepared to do.¹⁵

If BAVO's proposal for an alternative remains rather vague, I would prefer to read this not as a shortcoming in its own right. Giving a different account is, as the pragmatists have shown, a contribution in itself. Instead I would like to read it as an unkept promise, but also as a possibility (for me,

and for other readers too, I imagine) to envisage a further agenda setting. One of the burning questions remaining, in my opinion, is not so much what practice should do (in order to guarantee criticality, for example), but what the role and contribution of theory can be in the 'anti-theory setting' described by BAVO. Here, I think Irit Rogoff's view on the task of theory is useful, namely 'to introduce questions and uncertainties [...] where formerly there was some seeming consensus about what one did and how one went about it'.¹⁶ For Rogoff, the question is no longer about 'to be embedded or not', because 'involved' we are indeed, and because this counts as much for practice as for theoretical production. For Rogoff, the question of 'What is an artist?' (or: practitioner, cultural activist) cannot be seen disconnected from 'What is a theorist?' In such an utterly transdisciplinary mode - in the sense of a blending of theory and practice,¹⁷ theory is defined as a 'theoretical unravelling' or 'being undone'.¹⁸ For Rogoff, criticality is to replace critique because the latter was still attempting 'from the outside' to expose the 'hidden' power structures, oppressions, etcetera. Criticality, by contrast, places a stronger emphasis on the present, the situation, or situatedness. It is about articulation and actualization of potential rather than revealing faults. Which, of course, resonates with Stengers' reading of the interstice. I would argue that the practice Rogoff proposes in a context such as the one described by BAVO is one of 'embodied criticality', namely:

[C]riticality is in itself a mode of embodiment, a state from which one cannot exit or gain a critical distance but which rather marries our knowledge and our experience in ways that are not complimentary. Unlike 'wisdom' in which we supposedly learn from our experience, criticality is a state of profound frustration in which the knowledge and insights we have amassed does very little to alleviate the conditions we live through.¹⁹

BAVO's *Too Active to Act* may well be an unfinished project, proposing an as yet unconvincing alternative. However, blaming it for the lack of a clear alternative project would perhaps be too harsh and misplaced a criticism. As Rorty has argued, 'In particular people on the left keep hoping for a philosophical view which cannot be used by the political right, one which will lend itself only to good causes.'²⁰ The pragmatist tradition is not so much about developing a blueprint for the future - hoping that the future will then conform to that plan,²¹ - but about allowing the future to astonish and exhilarate us.²² So, through provocation, BAVO attempts to 'replace an unsatisfactory present with a more satisfactory future'.²³ It is as such that BAVO's unravelling of the current cultural scene allows us to make the crucial step from certainty and fixation to hope.

Notes

1. BAVO (Matthias Pauwels and Gideon Boie), *Too Active to Act. Cultureel Activisme na het Einde van de Geschiedenis*, (Valiz, 2010). Chapter title translated from Dutch: *Ingebed zijn of Niet? Dat is uitdrukkelijk niet de vraag!*
2. For example, in Human Geography, the debates between Nigel Thrift/Ash Amin and critical geographers, such as David Harvey and Neil Smith.
3. For a critical view on that debate, see for example Hilde Heynen, 'A Critical Position for Architecture?' in: *Critical Architecture*, ed. by Jane Rendell, Jonathan Hill, Murray Fraser, and Mark Dorrian (London, New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 48-56.
4. BAVO, 'Inleiding: hoe zou het nu zijn met de culturele avant-garde in Nederland?' in *Too Active to Act*, pp. 7-11, esp. p. 11.
5. See, for example, Erik Swyngedouw, Frank Moulaert, et al. *The Globalized City - Economic Restructuring and Social Polarization in European Cities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore (eds.), *Spaces of Neoliberalism* (Blackwell, 2002); and Neil Brenner, *New State Spaces. Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood* (Oxford

- University Press, 2004).
6. Isabelle Stengers, 'A "Cosmo-Politics" - Risk, Hope, Change. A conversation with Isabelle Stengers', in: Mary Zournazi, *Hope: New Philosophies for Change* (Australia: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 244-72, esp. p. 245.
 7. Ibid., p. 248.
 8. Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', in: *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*, (London: Free Association Books, 1991), pp. 183-201, esp. p. 191.
 9. Ibid., p. 192.
 10. Ibid., pp. 196, 198.
 11. BAVO discusses punk band Laibach's 1983 interview at the Yugoslavian State Television, entirely based on citations of communist ideology; and a Swedish artist collective [Aldis Ellertsdoettir, John Huntington, Mikael Näsström, and Fanny Carinasdotter], who, in 2005, presented a planning proposal for the city of Umeå that was far more extreme than the developers' plan they criticized - since, for example, it suggested an even vaster demolition scheme. BAVO, *Too Active to Act*, pp. 108-13.
 12. Ibid., p. 152
 13. Ibid., pp. 152-53.
 14. Ibid., p. 155.
 15. Ibid., p. 158.
 16. Irit Rogoff, 'What is a Theorist?' No pages, online source: <http://www.kein.org/node/62> [last accessed on 1 April 2011], originally published as 'What is a Theorist' in *Was ist ein Künstler*, ed. Katharyna Sykora (Berlin: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2003).
 17. Isabelle Doucet, Nel Janssens (eds.) *Transdisciplinary Knowledge Production in Architecture and Urbanism. Towards Hybrid Modes of Inquiry*. Urban and Landscape Perspective Series (Springer Verlag, 2011).
 18. Irit Rogoff, 'What is a theorist?' No pages.
 19. Irit Rogoff, "'Smuggling" - An Embodied Criticality', p. 1, taken from eicpc.net/dlfiles/rogoff-smuggling [last accessed 1 April 2011].
 20. Richard Rorty, 'Truth with Correspondence to Reality', in: *Philosophy and Social Hope*, originally published in German, 1994, in Richard Rorty, *Hoffnung Statt*

Erkenntnis (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 1994), pp. 23-46, esp. p. 23.

21. Ibid., p. 28.
22. Ibid., p. 28.
23. Ibid., p. 32.

Biography

Isabelle Doucet is a Lecturer in Architecture and Urbanism at the University of Manchester, School of Environment and Development (SED) and is connected as a lecturer and researcher to the Manchester School of Architecture and the Manchester Architecture Research Centre (MARC). She received her PhD from the Delft University of Technology, Architecture Theory, with Prof. Arie Graafland. Recent publications include the edited volume *Transdisciplinary Knowledge Production: Towards Hybrid Modes of Inquiry in Architecture and Urbanism*, co-edited with Nel Janssens (Springer Verlag, 2011).

