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Strijd - a Performative Exhibition

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STRIJD ∞ – A PERFORMATIVE EXHIBITION

Contemporary art can intervene directly at crucial times of protest or historical change. The ways in which it accomplishes this are as diverse as the contexts to which it responds. We would here like to point to just one project, *Strijd ∞*, an exhibition inaugurated in March 2015 in Amsterdam, which has been shown further afield, morphed into various formats and through which the experimental exhibition project *Strijd ∞* aimed to support and complement the visual culture of protest at the Maagdenhuis (seat of the Board of the University of Amsterdam). The building was appropriated by staff and students in response to severe cuts to the Humanities budget, the eviction of students from a previously occupied building and, generally, the more and more managerial and financial emphasis at the university – in Amsterdam and elsewhere. The protest was covered in the press internationally and protesters at other universities referenced Amsterdam and linked with the main student and staff initiatives, de Nieuwe Universiteit (DNU) and ReThink UvA respectively.¹ As an art-historical initiative, *Strijd ∞* is rooted in Warburgian thinking, combined with contemporary solidarity.

This initiative grew out of an art-historical undergraduate module, led by Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, which had as its main case study discussed the Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven's and the International Art Academy Ramallah's (IIAP) *Picasso in Palestine* project, 2011.² The Van Abbe and the IIAP transported Picasso's canonical painting *Buste de femme* (1943) from The Netherlands to Palestine to bring to light all practical and legal hurdles that exist and complicate a project that would be unremarkable elsewhere: a simple art loan. In doing so, they acted in Picasso's

own interest, while simultaneously challenging the contradiction between modernist ideals of universalism with which *Buste de femme* is imbued - including 'art for humanity' - and the contemporary international jurisdiction that systematically limits the Palestinians free movement, safety and culture in their daily lives. *Strijd ∞* was thus borne from an appreciation of what one can broadly call performative exhibition-making, or, more broadly, experimental institutionalism.³ There was no canonical artwork to be 'used' in Amsterdam, however, and we wished to act quickly and create a professional, but also cheap and ultimately 'removable' exhibition.

Compilation of Material

We drew on the experience and sources of a photo exhibition curated ten years earlier for an anniversary of the founding of the university's student union, as well as images available at the Amsterdam Museum and on the internet. The material that initially constituted *Strijd ∞* includes historical documentary photographs, (reproductions of) visual art, (reproductions of) historical protest posters and wall texts. Notably, the selected material not only gave a visual overview of the Maagdenhuis' history of protests and other student and staff protests, but also of the creativity involved in all such protests (singing, poster-design, organizing lectures and cultural events). The images were all copied on A3 paper (using university photocopiers) and the edges were surrounded with red and white 'police' tape. Hung in the appropriated Maagdenhuis, *Strijd ∞* complemented the protest's visual culture and adopted its DIY aesthetics, whilst remaining clearly distinguishable. The red and white tape that we decided to use - reminiscent of the tape the police use when marking off a certain place - stresses the urgency of the message that we wanted to convey with our exhibition and perhaps was also a provocation towards the police and the violent way in which they acted towards - and eventually evicted - the protestors.

We have always considered *Strijd ∞* to be an ongoing project and seeing as there were multiple student protests going on - or sparking up - at the same time, we wanted to show our solidarity towards our fellow protestors in other countries. Thus, we started creating 'care parcels': full sets of exhibition panels accompanied by a letter of solidarity, instructions for display, bluetack, and red and white tape. The idea behind our care parcels was that we would send a complete set of our exhibition to other university protest movements, able to be mounted anywhere else easily. In turn, they could add documents of their own protests to the exhibition's tumblr-page and later its website - as an ongoing and organic exhibition; hence our name: infinite struggle. For instance, the *Strijd ∞* exhibition was mounted in a lecture room at the Freie Universität in Berlin to accompany the lecture series *The Art of Protest* with speakers like W.J.T. Mitchell,⁴ Ariella Azoulay, Gregor Raunig and Oliver Marchart. In return, they allowed us to participate in the lecture series via Skype. That gave us opportunities to meet and create more 'care parcels'. The one sent to the FU was apparently removed by cleaners there.

Gradually, *Strijd ∞* developed from a documentary exhibition that sought to focus and mobilise an important and effective history of protest for present and future democratic changes in the university, into a self-reflecting research project examining the possibilities of contemporary curatorial practice. As an open-source and growing exhibition, *Strijd ∞* has been on display at several locations of the University of Amsterdam; the Freie Universität (FU) Berlin; Goldsmiths College London; The EYE Film Museum Amsterdam (for an evening of a 'research lab' led by students) and Basis voor Actuele Kunst (BAK), Utrecht (accompanied by an event with Charles Esche, Emma Mahony, Ahmet Ögüt and Gregory Sholette, 18 May 2016). At BAK, but especially already in May/June 2015 at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the project changed in nature. At every occasion *Strijd ∞* was exhibited from then on, installation shots were taken and these were added to the exhibition material along with complementary wall text panels. As such, *Strijd ∞* overtly reflects on it being an exhibition: the origins in the site of protest are clearly seen, however, art, curating and the museum become overtly involved. This conjures them up as further practices and sites of research, as well as seeks to bridge university protests with protests in art spaces. In 2011, a new Dutch government radically cut the art budget. The resulting protests were heartfelt, but not well organized - and did not elicit much response from universities. *Strijd ∞* may not be successful in joining forces, but it at least gestures towards a common cause by inhabiting both spaces. At the Van Abbemuseum, *Strijd ∞* came to be exhibited within the framework of Ahmet Ögüt's retrospective. His *Silent University*, involving refugee academics, is clearly inspired by Beuys' FIU, but caters for those who now need a forum to 'barter' education in order to be what is necessary for their lives.

Strijd ∞'s proliferating exhibition history gave us the opportunity to adjust the format to different constituencies. In the new Art History and Cultural Studies Department of the UvA (the old building was a casualty of real estate speculation), a reading table with books on art and politics was installed, as well as a pin board added: teaching and learning resources, as well as means for a reflection on the role of art (exhibitions) in protests in general. The exhibition became a reading room and a classroom, as e.g. Occupy Wall Street had been.

Currently, the exhibition lives on its website⁵ and can be added to and / or printed / installed freely by others. Several publications on *Strijd ∞* have been created, including an entry in *The Nomos of Images: Manifestation and Iconology of Law*.⁶ Furthermore, we organized a symposium on "art, activism and the university" at BAK (as mentioned with lectures by Emma Mahony, Gregory Sholette, Charles Esche, and Ahmet Ögüt). A book publication is also envisaged. Recently, *Strijd ∞* and complementary documentary material have been collected by the International Institute of Social History archive, to be consulted by contemporary and future protesters, exhibition-makers and researchers.

***Strijd ∞* and the internet**

Strijd ∞ stays true to its essence as a living/performative curatorial initiative, in part because of the internet's capabilities on many fronts. This might seem to be obvious or trivial, but the importance of the internet as a tool and mirror for the democratization and also for the *Strijd ∞* group's curatorial practice and goals cannot be overstated. An internet page is characteristically referred to as a 'cool' medium, in the terminology of media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who accounts for the way *Strijd ∞* exists on the internet. Hot pages are 'linear, clear, unambiguous, high resolution', while cool pages are 'cluttered, soft, ambiguous, and changeable' and the cool medium has a 'multisense mode of transmission'.⁷ The exhibition, as it is on the website, utilizes a plethora of modes of transmission of protest and information, such as re-disseminating photographs of the protests, or (more indirectly) showing photographic documentation of the different physical installations of *Strijd ∞*, a video recording of lectures of the event at BAK and plain text describing the history of the protests and the chronology of the *Strijd ∞* exhibition itself.

Strijd ∞ originally had a tumblr blog page, but the capabilities of that were insufficient, once *Strijd ∞* extended its mission as a self-reflexive and more widespread curatorial endeavor and so the website was created in its place. The website was only published and utilized at the end of August 2015, months after the end of the Maagdenhuis appropriation and the presence of *Strijd ∞* at the Van Abbemuseum and the FU, but it quickly became a means for the continuation of our group's work and the hub for the exhibition's 'snowball' distribution. It also enabled the extension of Ezra Benus' involvement in the group, despite the fact that his year at the UvA as an exchange student had come to an end and he returned to New York. Skype meetings now enable continuous involvement - and the internet creates ways in which remote participation is possible and vital. The work, however, could not have been begun without the Maagdenhuis as a hub and without the group of students coming together in a classroom in the first place. Now virtual means help to bridge the gap between face-to-face meetings. It is also the case that personal connections have spawned the additional installments of the exhibition. 'Purely' internet-enabled contact led to the exhibition at the FU, Berlin. The others involved us personally installing the exhibition (differently) again and again.

The protests at the UvA, though far from over, can be deemed as gaining considerable success in terms of the outcomes of the administrative and cultural changes that have taken place or are underway: the University's Board members resigned one by one; two committees were installed to investigate Finances and Real Estate, as well as Democratization and Decentralization. They have reported. The latter committee effected a referendum (December 2016), the outcomes of which are already envisaged: an inclusive Senate, as well as a Charter of principles that will form the basis for how we will work at the University. About two thirds of staff (more among students) wish there to be change in the management structure of the university. How changes in this latter area will be implemented is as yet unknown. Further reform will take time and energy.

The relative success of the protest in 2015, as opposed to some of the previous ones at the UvA, was aided in part by the specific enabling function of the internet age. This culture of the internet is known as the age of secondary oral culture, which "is the re-emergence of an oral type of discourse within literate cultures; it is a mixture of literate, oral, and electronic cultures in contemporary discourse".⁸ This term, coined by media theorist Walter Ong, has socio-



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2



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Images from:
<http://www.strijdinfinit.com>

1, 2, 3
Strijd at the occupied Maagdenhuis



4



5



6

4, 5,
Janneke Van Loon's work
included in Strijd at
Maagdenhuis

6
Strijd at the UvA Art History
Department

political ramifications, because secondary orality generates a sense for groups immeasurably larger than those of primary oral culture – McLuhan’s ‘global village’. Moreover, before writing, oral folk were group-minded because no feasible alternative had presented itself. In our age of secondary orality, we are group-minded self-consciously and programmatically.⁹

There is no question that the sharing of information and organizing of the protest through social media, created a ‘group-minded’ democratic culture in the occupation of the Maagdenhuis, where The New University (DNU), ReThink UvA and The University of Colour came into existence - in the analogue world. It is a truism that the internet also divides attention and aids participants of a movement speaking to like-minded people only, which is not conducive to effecting social change. *Strijd ∞* now provides opportunities to reflect on the modalities of change, as when Martha Rosler came to teach at the UvA as Stedelijk Museum / RKD / OSK Visiting Fellow in January 2017. She was particularly pleased to see the exhibition materials and linked her art-based struggles since the Vietnam War to the insight that people make changes and such projects gather these people around them (whether virtually enabled or not).

The digital presence of the groups just named and *Strijd ∞* marks the continued investment of people in the common cause - and aids international networks at a time when the urgency of our work only seems to be increasing. The internet version of the exhibition aids the real-time display in various places, where the infinite and global struggle for democratic education in the humanities and education at large are being discussed and fought for. The performative quality of the exhibition is, we hope, further enhanced by its accessibility to a global audience by way of the website and articles such as this.

Warburgian Rootedness

It is possible to discern similar forms of protest and gestures of solidarity in various times and locations. The images included in *Strijd ∞* show protesters from different decades with very similar body language: interlocking arms, sitting on the floor cross-legged, raised fists, determined looks, intense conversations with widespread arms, singing together in a circle, etc. Taken out of the chronological context of the exhibition, it is often hard to tell whether an image depicts the 1969 or 2015 protests, or any of the ten instances of university protests in Amsterdam in between. Not all gestures of protest, however, were always part of the ‘Maagdenhuis tradition’. Adopted from the Occupy movement, for instance, ‘common assemblies’ and ‘temperature checks’ were central to the repertoire of the 2015 protests and had not been used in the Maagdenhuis before. Thus, the various gestures of protest show both locally bound transhistorical solidarity and contemporary transnational solidarity.

Strijd ∞ does not wish to suggest protesters are caught in loopholes, bound to act like their predecessors or peers – or that it is futile to protest. Those academics at the UvA who are currently in positions of power find themselves confronted with their own active participation in the 1979 occupation etc. Thus an ‘us and them’ division was avoided. When many students and staff members ask the question what a university is, that inquisitive stance is shown to have a tradition at this institution. By extension, *Strijd ∞* shows both venerable university history and a root for the excellence of the institution.

An image or gesture is never singular, but is also never merely a duplicate. In every act of repetition the recurring gestures and tropes, Aby Warburg’s *pathos formulae*, are transformed to fit changing contexts. Observing such diachronic gestures reveals the affective quality of the protest and, in Warburg’s wake, we analyze a continuum of moves between rationality and irrationality: the continuous fight for things to work (a university to operate) according to well-reasoned and rounded arguments, rather than being reduced to facile number-crunching that hides hunger for power and feelings of inadequacy in equal measure. Values and facts will never coincide, but – as Warburg was himself incessantly trying¹⁰ – the evidence that *Strijd ∞* provides of generations of academic communities tackling this rift again and again has nothing short of humble heroism. In showing the visual history of university protests, while not suggesting any determining mechanism for the behaviour or an easy solution for the success of current and future protests, *Strijd ∞* tries to provide a productive sense of transhistorical and transnational solidarity.

Between protest and institution

The Bungenhuis and Maagdenhuis occupations by students and staff protesters in February 2015 responded not only to severe austerity measures within the University of Amsterdam's Faculty of the Humanities, but also respond to the broader neoliberal tendencies of financialisation, economic inequality, gentrification, delocalization, workers' exploitation, social stratification and instability that characterizes the modern welfare state.¹¹ Capitalism's deficiencies are reflected in many recent working-class uprisings and socio-political protests around the world. As W.J.T. Mitchell rightly notes, "the Occupy movement [...] is thus the verbal-visual image that unites the revolutionary movements from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street".¹² While all these movements are fundamentally distinct in their origins and tactics, *occupation* fundamentally resides on the insistent and imperative collective demand for being heard. *Occupatio* is a seizure, a rapid appropriation of public or institutionalized ground and a "tactic of taking the initiative in a space where one knows in advance that there will be resistance and counterarguments".¹³ The protest site offers a shared platform for assembly, speech and action, while *Strijd ∞* enriches, records and reflects on such processes. In light of the protests' immediacy and call for civil action, how can we account for the role of the project as a curatorial one?¹⁴

As a performative curatorial project, *Strijd ∞* aligned itself with the democratic ideas of the protests, yet at the same time remains an independent, growing project. A transient form of archival and activist expression, *Strijd ∞* does not rest on an aestheticized assemblage of precious artworks, but rather embodies and circulates the historical moment of re-instituting democracy and remembering its autonomous values. Through its continuity after the Maagdenhuis events in various spaces from the occupied building to the university round-table and to the art museum, *Strijd ∞* can be seen as an irregular curatorial object. By bringing the UvA protests' visual archive and its symbolic meaning within the institutionalized museum space, it can thus transfer ideas and has the tendency to bridge the gap between 'the street' and the institution. The exhibition's presence at BAK, The Van Abbemuseum, FU, in the virtual space or more recently, in November 2016 at one of the working conferences *Commoning UvA*, attest to its versatile and productive nature. As a form of curatorial activity, it remains a collective and ongoing mode of 'occupying' the public, institutional and individual consciousness.

Making the Common

Essential to understanding the way in which *Strijd ∞* contributes to making the common, a term that will be elaborated, is a further contextual description of the appropriated Maagdenhuis. During the time it was occupied by protesters, the doors of the Maagdenhuis were always open, effectively making the building accessible to anyone interested in being there, including students, staff, homeless people, members of the University Board, safety guards continuing their usual jobs, journalists, fellow protesters etc. A flourishing program of lectures, concerts, workshops, debates, film screenings, general assemblies, a community kitchen and other activities was established that can in hindsight be grouped under the general theme of '(creating) direct democracy'. For instance, David Graeber ('We are the 99%') gave a lecture and activist musician Typhoon performed a concert. Needless to say, all of these events and activities were free of charge. Furthermore, a myriad of (connected) social and activist movements sprung up in and around the Maagdenhuis protest, including, as mentioned, Humanities Rally, The New University, University of Colour, and ReThink. Many of these initiatives still exist, often developed or devolved into institutionally embedded formations and continue to connect people in action. Thus, the appropriated Maagdenhuis was no longer the gated seat of the University Board, nor a public (i.e. state-governed and -regulated) space, but rather a community-governed space for gathering, action and creation: a commons. Through collective action - physical as well as mental - the protesters performatively formed a community and with that community occupied a building and in that building constituted a shared space for the co-creation of knowledge, culture and change. Hence, the entire appropriation of the Maagdenhuis can be characterized as a project of 'making the commons'.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri are fond users of the term 'the common' (in singular), which they define twofold as "the common wealth of the material world - the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all nature's bounty [...]" and "[...] those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledge, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth".¹⁵

In the case of knowledge and social relations, especially the second category of the common is of importance. Hardt and Negri describe the production of this part of the common as dual: ‘the common is produced and it is also productive’.¹⁶ The relation between an individual or collective and the common is thus always one of performativity. Moreover, there is a third component to this relation: a use of the common that creates the common is always performed in common. This is evident when looking at language, to take Hardt and Negri’s example: “our power to speak is based in common, that is, our shared language; every linguistic act creates the common; and the act of speech itself is conducted in common, in dialogue, in communication”.¹⁷

What can be discerned in the images of protest in *Strijd ∞* is exactly this kind of performative action of making the common by using the common in common. The protesters receive their power to act from a common repertoire of protest (to speak and act out - in a physical way - the democratic right to resist); the actions of the protestors contribute to the repertoire of protest; the protestors’ acts of protest are always directed **against** someone or something and performed **with** others, making the protest an inherently social act. In this specific case, the last point is of great importance, as the common protest created the community of protesters, which in turn created the site of direct democracy in the Maagdenhuis. What *Strijd ∞* shows by juxtaposing pictures of the performative repetition of gestures of protest at the UvA is the politically significant “recognition that [...] social bodies [are] produced and continually reproduced through our everyday performances [and] that we can perform differently, subvert those social bodies and invent new social forms”.¹⁸

The making of the common, then, can be recognized as an important project of creating (direct) democracy. *Strijd ∞* relates to this project through showing, in a Warburgian manner, images – trans-historical tropes - of the performance of people that makes the commons. With this exhibition, we acknowledge the importance of the commons in the university in as well as in neoliberal society in general and hope to contribute to the promotion of democratic values and their performance in a visual way - questioning and challenging, in the process, currently dominant regimes of distribution of the sensible (to borrow Jacques Rancière’s term). According to this acknowledgement, we work in close collaboration with Commoning UvA, an interdisciplinary group of students and researchers at the University of Amsterdam and further afield that seeks to promote the transformation of systems and discourses informed by the commons ecology of thought.

We hope that the exhibition will continue to function as a reminder of the principle of the university being the common intellectual property of the academic community, of the immense intellectual and creative energy expended in protesting and reforming education over time, that it may travel further and have encouraging and even (however obliquely) have tangible positive effects elsewhere.

NOTES

¹ <http://www.rethinkuva.org>; De Nieuwe Universiteit; <http://universityofcolour.com>.

² Els Roelandt, ed., *Picasso in Palestine, A prior magazine #22*, Ghent: A prior 2013, <http://aprior.schoolofarts.be/pdfs/APM22.pdf>. Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes herself had researched Joseph Beuys’ work and is thus interested in artists’ educational initiatives, such as Beuys’ Free International University for Interdisciplinary Research, from 1973 onwards, which still exists in Amsterdam. In 2014 she curated an exhibition in Belfast, in order to hold in it a workshop for elected representatives of the Northern Irish Assembly: *Equilibrium? Royden Rabinowitch: Historical Turning Points and Artists’ Solidarity*, Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast, 9-29 January 2014. This exhibition shares methodological traits with *Picasso in Palestine*.

³ Charles Esche, “Coda: The Curatorial,” in Jean-Paul Martignon, ed., *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (London, Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2013), 241-244.

⁴ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011). When Mitchell speaks about the scopic regimes of the ‘War on Terror’ serving to repeat violence, the ‘repetition’ of images of peaceful protest may create reminders of successful movements of democratization - and repeat them.

⁵ <http://www.strijdinfinit.com/>.

⁶ Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, Ezra Benus, Tamara Breugelmans, Sepp Eckenhaussen, Astrid Kerchman, Emily Rhodes, Jeroen de Smalen, Frederike Sperling: “*Strijd ∞*”, in *Aesthetics of Resistance, Pictorial Glossary, The Nomos of Images*, blog of the Minerva Research Project ‘The Nomos of Images’, Max-Planck-Institute for Art History in Florence, 3 December 2015. <http://nomoi.hypotheses.org/259>.

⁷ Edmond H Weiss. ‘From Talmud Folios to Web Sites: HOT Pages, COOL Pages, and the Information Plenum,’ *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* vol. 41 no. 2 (1998): 97, 100.

⁸ Liliana Bounegru, “Secondary Orality in Microblogging,” *Masters of Media Blog*, University of Amsterdam, October 13, 2008.

⁹ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), 136.

¹⁰ For some of the political implications of Warburg’s work see: Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, “Das Jüdische Erbe in Aby Warburg’s Leben und Werk,” *Menora 5: Yearbook for German-Jewish History 1994*, ed. Julius H. Schoeps, Salomon Ludwig Steinheim Institute of German-Jewish History at the University of Duisburg (Munich, Zurich: Serie Piper, 1994), 141-169.

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion and in-depth account of the relation between capitalism, the positioning of the creative class and the Occupy movement see Martha Rosler’s essay “The Artistic Mode of Revolution: From Gentrification to Occupation,” *e-flux*, March 2012, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/33/68311/the-artistic-mode-of-revolution-from-gentrification-to-occupation/>, and the interview with Noam Chomsky “Conversations with History” at the Institute of International Studies, UC Berkeley, <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people2/Chomsky/chomsky-con2.html>.

¹² W.J.T Mitchell, “Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation,” *Critical Inquiry* 39.1 (Autumn 2012): 11.

¹³ Quoted in: H. A. Kelly, “Occupatio as Negative Narration: A Mistake for Occultatio/Praeteritio,” *Modern Philology* vol. 74 (Feb. 1977): 311–315.

¹⁴ We remember Martha Rosler’s scepticism regarding art’s potential for bringing social change. She notes that ‘people and movements make social change’ while the art’s task is to shape their feelings and energies. 8 January, 2017. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

¹⁵ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Boston: Harvard UP, 2009), vii.

¹⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Penguin, 2006), 197.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 201.

¹⁸ *ibidem*, 200.

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