

## PUTTING OURSELVES AT RISK IN PUBLIC: INTERVIEW WITH JEANNE VAN HEESWIJK

In the early 1990s, Jeanne van Heeswijk established her practice as a socially engaged artist working in what was, at the time, an unusual manner. She remained at a distance from traditional art institutions, her work at home in the community and in the city. To this day, Van Heeswijk always works in collaboration with others. Currently, together with 125 organizations, movements, artists, and activists, she is working on *Philadelphia Assembled*, a project that seeks to visualize 'a network of resilience' through personal and collective narratives that make up Philadelphia's urban fabric. In many ways Van Heeswijk may be seen as a prime example of what *The Art of Impact* aims to achieve: making an impact *on* and *in* society. In fact, *Freehouse*, another project she initiated, is one of the projects that has been selected to receive funding from *The Art of Impact* subsidy programme. In this interview, Van Heeswijk elaborates on her practice and further explains how she critically positions herself *vis-à-vis* the funding scheme and amidst current developments of the Dutch cultural landscape.

Kunstlicht\*: Can you tell us something about the way you work and perhaps mention one of your favorite projects? What is the role of process in your work and to what extent can your projects be considered 'visual' art?

Jeanne van Heeswijk: A notion that has been chasing me throughout my career is that I'm 'an artist without a studio'. That's obviously not true. At the moment I actually have two, one in Rotterdam and one in Philadelphia, but I see the city as one large 'field of interaction' in which I work. Within this field different actions are developed, some of which can take an autonomous form like a book, a film, or even an art object, which could be presented in a museum. I don't have a favorite project, because most projects are dynamic, continuously in motion, constantly being reworked and reshaped. But it would be a misconception to think that my work is 'only process-based'. For example, *Amnesia of a Landscape* (2006–2009) a project for which, in the span of a few years, we travelled with people on their routes from home to work. It was about the way the landscape above Rotterdam was changing at an incredible pace, and how these developments were so drastic that people couldn't relate to or imagine their surroundings anymore. This project culminated in a video installation that is now part of the collection of Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam. Other projects may come together in interventions or forms of organization. For example, *The Afrikaanderwijk Cooperation* is a cooperative on the scale of a neighbourhood, or *Homebaked Community Land Trust* and *Homebaked Bakery Co-operative* which takes place in Anfield, Liverpool (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes these processes are also exhibited, so they become temporarily tangible, testable, and measurable, in which case they can be questioned again with all people involved. It is important to learn together about the process but also to unlearn certain ways of doing things. Sometimes you need to reflect on yourself and a group to realize that you overstepped (some of) your boundaries, or that your project has been appropriated by 'the powers that be' and that you need to backtrack and 'undo' that. When projects

<sup>1</sup> This is an aspect of the project *2Up2Down / Homebaked* (2010-ongoing). This project, commissioned by the Liverpool Biennale, invites people from Anfield and Breckfield, Liverpool to collectively rethink and envisage their neighbourhood's future. The project is settled around the former Mitchell's Bakery and now also includes *Homebaked Community Land Trust*, which enables collective ownership of communal properties, and *Homebaked Bakery*, a co-operative organization and business to reopen the bakery as a social enterprise. See also: [www.jeanneworks.net/projects/2up2down\\_\\_\\_homebaked/](http://www.jeanneworks.net/projects/2up2down___homebaked/).

take form, emerge visibly, and become a platform, it's important to also bring them up for discussion again. They should create friction in their context and take root again. For twenty-five years now I've been practicing this dynamic and constant process of emergence and re-rooting, which I call 'radicalizing the local'.

KL: You sometimes refer to yourself as an 'urban curator'. What is the importance of the city to you and how do you work within it?



fig. 1 *Homebaked*, a viable cooperative business, Anfield, Liverpool, 2013. Photo: Mark Loudon.

JvH: The city and its social, cultural, or emotional 'tissue', which I call the 'urban substrata' of the city are central to my work. That is what influences our habitat much more than its physical appearance. How can we shape the place we live? How can we find ways in which we want to live together within this incredibly rapidly changing world? How can we get a grip on the processes of design, regulations, policymaking, and how can people join or influence these processes? How can people have an equal say and take responsibility? These are political questions, to which David Harvey's motto 'the right to the city' is central.<sup>2</sup> Harvey argues that in order to build cities to 'our heart's desire', we have to understand that that's not an individual desire, but a collective desire. I think the conflict this question contains is an important one: how do we construct something according to our desires whilst transcending the individual and attaining the collective needs. In Harvey's thinking, one of the most neglected of our human rights is the right to develop our cities as a collective desire.

KL: In a recent lecture for Bard College you talked about 'active forms of citizenship'. How do these relate to demands from the government that asks citizens to 'participate'? What is your stance on the 'participation society'?

JvH: I have to say, I have often been presented as a figurehead of the 'participation society', for which I have received a lot of criticism surrounding 'instrumentalization' by governments agencies. The fact is that I am not a big fan of the 'participation society' as it is coined. At the same time, because I am tired of the debate, I often stress the fact that I don't mind being an instrument, but one that works towards self-organization, shared ownership and 'the right to the city'. However, of course I do not want to be an instrument for smoothing the implementation of policies that diminish the rights of people to their city. If participation means joining in but not having a say, or if it is a way for the government to retreat from their responsibilities without listening to the people and allowing for private temporary endeavors to do its job without lending resources, then it is a cosmetic measure. And I reject that particular understanding of 'participation'.

<sup>2</sup> David Harvey, 'The Right to the City', in: *New Left Review* 53, September-October 2008, pp. 23–40. Available online: [newleftreview.org/11/53/david-harvey-the-right-to-the-city](http://newleftreview.org/11/53/david-harvey-the-right-to-the-city).

KL: That is exactly why we wanted to do an interview with you. Your work is often mentioned as an excellent example of art that has an impact on society. How do you see the historical development of the reception of your work?

JvH: When I started twenty-five years ago, many thought I had gone 'off-track'. Some thought it was 'cute' that I worked with people and that I wanted to make socially engaged work. The terminology around this practice has shifted enormously: from 'community based practice', 'public art', 'urban interventions', to 'socially engaged practices', 'legislative art', and 'social justice practice'. I think now the preferred term is 'social practice'. These shifting terms show that there is an urge to define what this practice is about. When taking the Netherlands into consideration, you can see that more and more art has to be *utilitarian*, if we are to justify its societal value. The 1990s probably were the heydays of autonomous art in the Netherlands, and still this is viewed as 'real art', while other forms of practicing art are viewed with suspicion. People would think of drinking coffee with residents when they thought of 'community-based art' and refer to it as social work.

KL: Your project *Freehouse* has been subsidized by *The Art of Impact*. What is *Freehouse* about and why did you choose to apply for this subsidy?

JvH: *Freehouse* is a research project into the relation between art, culture, and the economy, which was already established in 1998 in Rotterdam. From this research, over the years many interventions have been made in the Afrikaanderwijk from which a series of cooperative working places emerged (such as the *Wijkkeuken van Zuid*, *Wijkatelier van Zuid* and *Wijkwaardenhuis*) dedicated to rethinking values other than strictly monetary ones. How can we define impact other



fig. 2 Afrikaanderwijk Cooperative, *Acts of Balance*. Part of *The Value of Nothing* exhibition, TENT, Rotterdam, 2014. Photo: Aad Hooge.

than direct neoliberal economic impact for which growth is so enormously important? From all these interventions and cooperative workplaces, the *Afrikaanderwijk Cooperation* was established, which is now in its third year.<sup>(fig. 2)</sup> *Freehouse* handed things over and took a step back in order for this cooperation to develop its own ways and its own identity. *Freehouse* is a member of the *Afrikaanderwijk Cooperation* and in fact still is the research body. What we want to do with the money from *The Art of Impact* is to research and monitor the creation of values in the co-op anew. The power of *Freehouse* was always to test things, to seek interaction, to set things in motion and to continuously take the risk of making mistakes and to experiment. The cooperation, however, has become a community governing body, which runs the risk of becoming a 'fixed' structure that does not take risks. So, we involve *Freehouse* with the cooperation again, in order to incite its trajectories. It is a little bit tongue-in-cheek, but I thought it would be interesting to apply for financial support from

*The Art of Impact*, as we are actually calling into question the 'impact' that our project has. In other words, the *Afrikaanderwijk Cooperation* has a particular local impact at the moment and it is becoming increasingly autonomous, which is great. Hence, now is the time to bring its impact up for discussion, before it becomes something that we already know [a familiar institutional model]. Is this the kind of impact that we want? Is this the way it optimally contributes to gaining more of a say on this territory? Now that it has shaped itself, we can reflect on it, take it into consideration, discuss, deconstruct, and move it back into motion.

KL: How do you usually fund your projects?

JvH: For me it is important that my work is financed from diverse sources. There is an assumption that I work for municipalities or large housing corporations but most of the projects are self-initiated or co-commissions and we usually actively look for a variety of funding sources. It is important that there is more than one commissioner. If a project is happening in the complex world, questioning the funding structure and looking for the just funding are important aspects to me. You need to be very careful and aware of where the money is coming from! For instance, if you receive money from the government, you need to think of what the money was intended for. How can you use the money for your own projects to maintain your own goals and not become a governmental instrument? You need to continuously question that.

KL: What does 'making impact' mean, according to you?

JvH: The title of this subsidy programme is problematic in itself as 'impact' is a neoliberal term. It raises the question of what 'impactful' means and what or whom it is directed towards. I find Tania Bruguera's notion of 'useful art' for which she uses the term *Arte Util* more helpful, as 'useful art' is different from 'impactful art'. Something can have use without necessarily being impactful. Impact is often defined in terms of an increase in value but use-value is something else than surplus value. It is about time that the debate on these issues is taken up by more people and allowed to mature.

KL: We would like to think of this issue as contributing to that discussion. How easy was it to receive the funding for this quite critical and reflective project? To what extent do you think there is a discrepancy between the neoliberal policy and the projects chosen?

JvH: I have been part of a few discussions organized by *The Art of Impact*. To my surprise, a substantial part of the projects are rather autonomous and diverting from societal impact. There are some experimental public space projects, some more 'outreach' based, and a few overtly political projects like Jonas Staal's important *New World Summit: Stateless Democracy*. So I think that they have tried to fund a wide range of projects. In general in the political landscape of the Netherlands you see that apart from the idea of being *utilitarian*, art has to have an educational component as well, which I find complicated. Apart from the self-sufficient economic demands, often the function of art is that it needs to elevate citizens.

KL: Sociologist Pascal Gielen (whom we have interviewed for this issue as well) brings up the idea of the commons as "a space or arena that can be both physical and

symbolic, both material and mental and may serve as a resource for all".<sup>3</sup> To him, the commons are a space in which negotiations and disruptions take place continuously, rather than a place of harmony. Do you see the commons reflected in your work?

JvH: Thinking about the communal use of space has been important for my practice all along, and the current rethinking of the commons is helpful for that. I agree that we need to create spaces that can serve as a resource for all, but the challenge with developing those spaces collectively is organizing across race, gender, class, and religious and political affiliations. Friction and confrontations are central, and for this it is important that people discuss their value systems and dare to let go of their subject positions for the building of trust and collective desire.

Canadian art historian Max Haiven discusses the need to transform imagination [he writes]:

Neoliberal capitalism has a dramatic and powerful influence on our imagination regarding who and what is valuable. It depends on transforming each of us into an agent of neoliberal competition, individualism and fear. Challenging this system will take more than just economic and political policies or movements. We will also need to transform culture and the imagination. [...] The imagination from the very beginning is in motion, it's embodied, it's a collective exercise of care.<sup>4</sup>

What speaks to me is that he notes imagination is "a collective exercise of care". This collective exercise of (urban) imagination is important because it challenges systems that are exclusively built on economic and political policies. Care here is multifold, on one hand it means inherently negotiating between our own assumptions and someone else's, and creating safe spaces for people to work through this. In that in-between space we risk our subjectivities not only through discussing values, but living our values in physical space together. This practice of making visible our values is by definition full of conflict. It takes place in a societal field of tension in which we collectively ask how we can live together, and to discuss values among us. However, it is quite a precarious thing to question yourself and your value systems. So it is important to create safe spaces of 'care' in order for people to be able to actually put themselves at risk in public and change society.<sup>5</sup>

Jeanne van Heeswijk studied Fine Arts at the Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht (1988-1990), and Arts Education at the Academy of Fine Arts, Tilburg, the Netherlands (1983-1988).

\* Interview by Rosa te Velde

<sup>3</sup> Pascal Gielen, 'Performing the Common City: On the Crossroads of Art, Politics and Public Life', in *Arts in Society* (eds. Pascal Gielen, Sander Bax and Bram Ieven), Valiz; Amsterdam 2015, p. 291.

<sup>4</sup> Max Haiven, *Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power: Capitalism, Creativity and the Commons*, London and New York: Zed Books, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Van Heeswijk refers to an interview with Hannah Arendt from 1964 in which she reflects on German philosopher Karl Jaspers' statement on the manner in which there can be participation in the public domain. Arendt states: "Nur wer sein Leben und seine Person mit in das Wagnis der Öffentlichkeit nimmt, kann sie erreichen." Hannah Arendt, in an interview with Günter Gaus in October 1964. Accessed through: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsolmQfVsO4on](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsolmQfVsO4on), 24 July 2016.

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