

# MANAGEMENT OF DISTRUST. MEASURING AND MONITORING IN POLICY MAKING: INTERVIEW WITH PASCAL GIELEN

Pascal Gielen is a professor of sociology of art and cultural politics. In his work he criticizes the ways in which neoliberal politics transform the cultural field. In order to contextualize cultural policies such as *The Art of Impact*, Kunstlicht asked Gielen to elaborate on a number of issues brought to light in his books *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude: Global Art, Politics and Post-Fordism* (2009), and *Interrupting the City: Artistic Constitutions of the Public Sphere* (2015).

Kunstlicht\*: Over the last few years we have witnessed how in the UK and in the Netherlands, but also generally in Europe, the welfare state is being substituted by 'participation societies' that seek to activate citizens. What are the implications of enforcing the activation of citizenship?

Pascal Gielen: I believe that behind this activation there is a strong process of moralization, an urge by governments to create new social values. The activation of citizenship implies individual and social responsibility that manifests into good deeds for the community. This logic fetishizes participation and ultimately de-politicizes citizens. It is important to mention two names in this context: sociologist Willem Schinkel and professor of education Gert Biesta. In 'The Virtualization of Citizenship', Schinkel talks about the shift from a technical juridical articulation of citizenship to a moral one.<sup>1</sup> Even more importantly, and that's when I come to Biesta, citizenship is increasingly defined as an individual responsibility. In the rhetoric of 'participation society' the individual is the one who has to take his or her own responsibilities, which is reminiscent of the American Dream rhetoric. You get all the chances—but you have to do it yourself! And if you do not succeed it is your fault. This is moralization. And it is also depoliticization; the state tries to get rid of its responsibility and makes citizen's participation an obligation instead of a right.

KL: You argue in *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude* that neoliberalism hides its distrust behind a discourse of usefulness, helpfulness, and realism. Rather than the word 'neoliberalism', you use the expression 'repressive liberalism' to emphasize how these systems purposefully try to control or contain the freedom they proclaim. To what extent does the funding of culture lead to its neutralization in critical and political terms and when does it start to act as a 'repressive instrument' (as you have coined in your book) that tries to control what it proclaims?

PG: You can expect that when the government is giving money it asks for something in return. It is the demand of 'an effect of art', either social or economic, which is problematic. The core of the issue is the way governmental funding is implemented, and the instruments developed to follow up and monitor the effects it demands. That's where repressive neoliberalism comes in, with two major problems: 'management of distrust' and 'flatness'. 'Management of distrust' implies that the state manages the outcome of the money it gives by making what an artist does measurable, developing instruments of control, which are repressive.

The second aspect has been an issue since the 1980s. Then it was called 'professionalization' and now 'cultural entrepreneurship'.

<sup>1</sup> Willem Schinkel, 'The Virtualization of Citizenship' in: *Critical Sociology*, 36(2) 2010, pp. 265-283.

The whole subsidy system is in fact a competitive market system. You apply and you know you are always in competition with somebody else. If you get the money, someone else will not. And I think this system—which exists in most European countries—has already had its moment because it does not improve quality at all. Usually the people who win competitions are very good at writing applications, but are not necessarily the best artists or curators. And there[in] a huge problem emerges: another effect of repressive liberalism, which I call 'flatness' or 'the rule of the average'.

KL: What would an alternative to this system look like?

PG: We are still within a top-down system today. Already since the 1980s in the Netherlands there have been 'experts' who decide on *l'art pour l'art*. I think it is important to examine completely different democratic systems and to look into the possibilities of peer-to-peer systems in this field. I have one example from Zagreb: the organization *Culture 2 Commons*, which is also an independent cultural scene. To distribute subsidies they hold general assemblies. Everyone in the cultural field can participate. It is a big hassle to organize: it takes a whole week of deciding and discussing, but you get valuable lengthy peer-to-peer discussions, and a deliberation of arguments on quality. Everyone is witness to the debates. So there is an exchange of knowledge, and true 'professionalization' is built up in this process. In such a process, subjectivity and discussion are important. In this sense, it could be good if funding programmes worked with one or two curators. Because then you give someone a lot of power but at the same time a lot of critique is addressed to them. They will be obliged to argue and to go into discussion. In bureaucratic systems that responsibility disappears with the phrase 'the committee decided'. So I think it is important to be responsible for one's decisions, which also means to argue and deliberate.

KL: To what extent is *The Art of Impact* ideologically redirecting the policy of austerity—rendering the arts as a tool of intervention and engagement with society? Or is it a continuation of those same austerity politics?

PG: Under Halbe Zijlstra, art was defined as a left-wing hobby. It was a very straightforward, and of course populist, positioning. In the discourse of 'art is a leftist hobby', their distrust was clear. Art was an ideological opposite, and why would you subsidize your opposition? What has happened now, and indeed you can consider it to be a continuation, is a more subtle way to develop this management of distrust. Now it is not presented as an opposition: "we let them in, but...under certain conditions." In fact, governments or policy makers—but it can also be, as Pierre Bourdieu states, the orthodoxy of the artistic field—are actually afraid of what comes in, of what could be completely weird or different.

I think agents from the artistic field were afraid to lose their position when the discussions on the leftist hobby started: it was a kind of divide and rule system. The field didn't respond with anger. I think they should have said: "Yes, we are the left-wing hobby! Left and hobby!" Hobby indeed means 'free space'.

KL: The idea of art being useful comes from artistic practice. However, *The Art of Impact*, as a governmental policy, imposes an idea of usefulness upon the artist. To what extent is it important to differentiate between projects that have already been

working in this field for years, growing out of a specific art historical context, and projects that are simply latching onto the hype of governmental funding for 'socially aware art'?

PG: I think that art has always been useful, even since modernity. The black square by Malevich is useful in a certain time in a certain place. It's about the way you position a work of art in a certain time in society. And I am influenced by the very conservative systems theory of sociologist Niklas Luhmann who claims that the function of art is to show that everything that is can be different. That is the function of art in society. I think by demanding or predefining how art has to be useful you avoid in fact that art can become useful. When you address a certain target, for example a community or social cohesion, you enclose a range of possibilities. This doesn't mean that you cannot make social art. But it shouldn't be done because of some kind of obligation to the government. The problem is that by demanding something in particular, cultural policies cause abuse. Especially in the Netherlands you have those neighbourhood projects in which artists work with housing corporations. Many artists saw this as an alternative way to finally get money because they were not subsidized. This is a kind of abuse. And I'm always afraid, also with *The Art of Impact*, that artists think: "Aaah there is money here — okay — we will do something! A 'nice' project."

KL: In the article 'Autonomy via Heteronomy' (2009) you develop an argument that takes as its core Bruno Latour's logic that artists' sources should be as heterogeneous as possible in order to actually preserve their autonomy. Often cultural policies such as *The Art of Impact*, demand that the projects have co-funders. Could we understand this requisite as the government's attempt to offer institutional guarantees that facilitate self-determination and autonomy? Could you, while taking into consideration *The Art of Impact*, further elaborate on the importance of achieving autonomy via heteronymous connections, and more importantly, the importance of criticality within it?

PG: It's complicated. Indeed, I agree that you can only build a heteronomous position by heterogeneous engineering. However, particularly with research and artistic projects, when other partners come in, it becomes dangerous. How can you keep your autonomy? In this heterogeneous engineering there are two main dangers. One is a bureaucratic one: the fact that you always have to negotiate before you are there. And the second one is that, in the *poldermodel*, you might lose your identity in the process of compromising and achieving consensus, resulting in the project losing its lucidity.<sup>2</sup> I am critical of Bruno Latour's ideas about the network. For him, the more connections you have, the better. But he is not selective in his connections. As an artist and as a scientist, I think it is very important that you can decide in a critical way what 'the via' is— which connections you make. And this does not work with the obligation of matching. This works when the fund says: "Here is 20.000 euros: you have to collaborate, but you can decide yourself. If you do not find other partners, you only have 10.000 euros." There the option to find partners is open. It gives you independence. Therefore, as an artist, it is important to recognize your affiliations and dependencies. By defining them you can also be much more critical about what you want. In the art world there is critique when it comes to autonomy.

People have this romantic view of someone who is not from this world and works in an isolated garage somewhere. But that has

<sup>2</sup> The *poldermodel* refers to 'typically Dutch' consensus-based policymaking to which pragmatism is central.

never been the position of the artist. Never! The artist has always been connected. The whole notion of autonomy has almost become a dirty word. However, modern society is built upon autonomy: every politician needs to be autonomous; the surgeon needs to be autonomous in his hospital to decide; I, as a scientist, have to be autonomous. The crisis is that we doubt whether autonomy is necessary. I think autonomy is necessary in every professional field, and this is being deconstructed by market logic. I call this 'repressive liberalism': individual freedom is promoted by governments and private companies, but at the same time the control of individual behaviour and creativity increases enormously. Audits, accreditations, personal evaluation talks, monitoring and other evidence[-based] policy strategies: policy makers try to measure everything. This results in increased bureaucracy so that you can no longer concentrate on the job you have studied for and are skilled in. Repressive liberalism leads to deprofessionalization. For example: the surgeon cannot decide for himself or herself and with his or her peers anymore if he or she is a good surgeon or not.

KL: Where does the idea of measurement come from and what is the effect of it?

PG: The idea of measurement comes from 'evidence-based policies', from Margaret Thatcher. She used it to privatize the public health care system and to actually get rid of it. This has been copied in an uncritical way by the cultural field. With subsidy programmes like *The Art of Impact*, it always depends on how it is implemented, which implies a kind of monitoring. It is a big illusion that by subsidizing a project for one year it can have some sort of impact. We are talking about culture. Culture is about habits, values, long-term processes! After twenty years, not one, you could maybe measure its effects on the city, the people, the environment. It is a completely wrong idea that you can measure impact after a year. Also, 'making impact' starts from a belief that is impossible for me: that you can 'make society'.

KL: Your book *Interrupting the City: Artistic Constitutions of Public Sphere* reflects on how art can constitute the (urban) public sphere, either by contributing to consolidating the dominant social order or by subverting it. In this process of subversion, the idea of the 'commons' is central to your research. What is the commons? And what is the importance of struggle or confrontation? How could the commons revitalize democracy?

PG: Historically the idea of the commons is rooted in the 17th century. There is a beautiful book called *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* by Ellen Meiksins Wood, which is about the commons in the 17th century in the UK countryside.<sup>3</sup> The author explains that capitalism was not developed in cities, but in the countryside where there were well-organized spaces with rules of use, abuse, and sanction systems. I always start there, because it is not an idyllic place or anarchy. Another important work for understanding the commons is *Common Wealth* by Negri and Hardt.<sup>4</sup> I agree with them that the commons is not only about materiality, but also about immaterial things like language or science, which are very hard to privatize or make state property. However, they are very optimistic about the future: we will go into the commons anyway. In my definition I bring in Rancière and Mouffe: agonism and dissensus. For me the commons is not a 'community' where you live in a kind of 1960s' harmony; it is a space of constant conflict, quarrels, and discussions. Discussions are productive for the commons. Moreover, Negri and Hardt also

<sup>3</sup> Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*, London & New York: Verso, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

state that the commons is neither private nor public; it is both of these and something else at the same time: between the market and the state, in another sphere. Throughout history there are many traces of the commons, as is also addressed in *No Culture No Europe*. In law systems for example you still have a pro bono lawyer if you cannot afford a lawyer. The commons is sometimes presented as a romantic idea. However, our current free education system is also part of it. It is the democratic idea that everyone has free entrance, everyone has rights. Different from what Negri and Hardt state, in my view the commons needs to be ruled and there will always be a ruler or a governmental body that has to protect the commons. A question indeed is whether you could organize the commons yourself, for example like a cooperative. In the area of Leeuwarden in the Netherlands you see this with windmills, where everyone is an owner. But again, you need some rules or governmental support to guarantee it will function well.

But why is the idea of the commons important to revitalize democracy? The commons makes another democracy possible than the one we are used to in Western societies. Nowadays democracy is understood in a quantitative way. Every four or five years we vote anonymously. The votes are counted and the majority gets power for the coming few years. A democracy of the commons works differently. It's what I call a qualitative democracy of the singular. The commons can only exist when singular, sometimes idiosyncratic voices, can pop up. The important thing is that those singular voices try to find public support by argumentation, or by convincing in their practice of doing. So a democracy of the singular builds collective support that starts from a singular, sometimes strange idea, of 'otherness'. A voice that was never heard before comes in. An idea or a new vision breaks through without anyone expecting it. For me it is important that the commons makes this possible: opening again and again the democratic space for the singular.

KL: And with the purpose of revitalizing democracy, how can art particularly contribute to this process or the generation of commons?

PG: It is very important to remember that a common place doesn't exist: you have to make and re-make it all the time. It is not a material place where you go: [instead] you make it through language. And when you bring in a singularity, a completely weird idea or another voice — of which you have to convince others — you contribute to the commons. So the process of coming from a singular unknown point of view and making it public is for me the process of the commons. And not once, but again and again. Art, since modernity, has an important quality because it is defined as something 'singular'. If it is not recognized as singular, it is not perceived as art. Art has the privilege of bringing in other voices; therefore it is also very skilled in this. It can always bring in the singular to feed the common.

KL: Can we consider the commons itself as an autonomous space?

PG: What happens there can only happen there. It is ruled. It has its own logic and that is autonomy, but in a very heteronomous way. Everyone and everything can come in and therefore it is always shifting. And you hope that the singular voice comes in and feeds it. So it is a place where you can go in for free, take things for free: buildings, or streets or internet. These kinds of platforms are much more interesting to me. Maybe we should give money to 'a space' where people go in, and trust them. I wouldn't know how to organize it technically, but it's possible.

KL: You stress the necessity of guarding these spaces from private and public control. How do we understand the commons in relation to public or private funding and dependency on financial means? Are you in any way proposing to definancialize these spaces?

PG: I have nothing against money. It is not about currency. Money is a wonderful tool as it makes impersonal relations and exchange possible. When I talk about definancialization, I am referring to the financialization system that had an enormous impact on the 'real' economy. The problem is virtual speculation. With the stock market virtual economy came in: an economy that can blow up your company, without your practice being related to it or the opposite. This is financialization, this kind of completely virtual psychology instead of money as a currency for exchange. Speaking in Marx's terms — we have to get back to use-value. Currently, value has become a simulation by marketing, brands, etcetera. But you wear shoes because you can walk in them, not because they have the Nike-logo. In general we should think of how we can reduce things back to their use-value. This is definancialization. This applies for art as well. So in the commons there can be an exchange of money. But like Richard Sennet I also believe that the social is the only thing that can replace contractual or monetary relationships, and in this way social relationships play an important role for the commons.

KL: As a closing remark: how do you see the future of subsidy programmes that demand social impact from the artistic practice?

PG: If we are pessimistic, this tendency will grow. But at the same time it will receive more critique and there will be resistance. A year ago I gave a lecture organized by Kunstenpunt in Flanders (an art centre) for an event about neoliberalism and art. The director who introduced this event started by reading a text which seemed to be something related to neoliberal art policies, similar to *The Art of Impact*, about monitoring, etcetera. Everyone thought he was talking about the cultural field; but it was a natural landscape policy with the same rhetoric. It is happening in all fields. However, the awareness about monitoring is growing and people feel very negative about it. The possibility of resisting the system lies in finding heterogeneous connections with all those other fields; and creating from this bad feeling a kind of positive anger. This is where a shift comes in. I am quite optimistic: everybody sees it. It is now a moment of collectivizing these things. I don't see it so much in the Netherlands to be honest, but certainly in Spain and Italy. In Belgium we have movements such as *Hart boven Hard*, or in Zagreb, *Culture 2 Commons* where unions are mixed with cultural professionals and others. These movements are hybrid and they also have very heterogeneous agendas or claims. Claims for gender equality, social, economical equality are combined with ecological issues. These new civil movements fight in that sense in a holistic way for total change. This is a new way of struggling which is often not understood by mainstream media or leading politicians. I think this will be the civil struggle of the future.

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\* Interview by Lara Garcia Diaz, Cristina Marques Moran and Rosa te Velde.