

What is the place of art in all this?

A conversation with Maria Hlavajova, Utrecht 16 February 2007

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Within the bare circumstances of our contemporary world—reigned as it is by a fear of the unknown, the threat of war, terror, economic downfall, increasing globalisation and growing nationalism(s)—it seems appropriate to question the role of art and artistic practice, and more specifically the role that the art institution could or should take on. Earlier this year, I spoke with Maria Hlavajova, the artistic director of BAK, basis voor actuele kunst (basis for contemporary art), about the motifs, functioning, principles and implications of her engaging programme. The overarching question on the table was: How do you run a critical art institution?

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AW: Maria, thank you very much for agreeing to and making time for this conversation. It is impressive to see what BAK is becoming and has become so far. Especially the way in which you developed a relatively small and locally oriented art space into a place, a basis for art, which is focused on research and reflection on contemporary art and artistic practice with an altogether worldwide scope. How would you describe the development of BAK since you started working here as an artistic director?

MH: You use the term ‘becoming’ and I think that is something very important in what we’ve been engaged with here. BAK has been in a constant process of becoming. When I began working here in 2000 I tried to figure out what an ‘ideal’ contemporary art institution could be: How can an art institution, in an interesting, constructive and productive way, respond to what is happening in contemporary art? We also wanted to consider this rather abstract idea of what an ideal institution would be in light of the circumstances of where it is located. Utrecht is a relatively small city that—with all due respect to all artists and cultural producers active here—does not really have its own art scene in a traditional sense. Other major institutes around are 45 minutes away—within the city conglomerate we call Randstad—in major cities in the Netherlands, namely in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Back in 2002, when BAK was still Begane Grond (ground floor), we developed a series of talks in collaboration with a number of cultural practitioners in the Netherlands and abroad, called *Becoming Oneself*. And that is actually what we still believe in: ‘becoming oneself.’

Clearly, ‘becoming oneself’ refers to various theories of becoming, as we know them from philosophy and social science. In that sense, it is an art institution that *isn’t*, but is in a constant process of becoming one, although without having a precise definition of what that ‘one’ actually is. That definition is lacking consciously because it is a kind of intuitive ideal, which is itself in continuous flux.

Within this process, which embraces the idea of change in ever-morphing circumstances, BAK has been envisioned as a ‘basis.’ We see it as a set of minimum necessary means in terms of space (we have only 120 square meters of exhibition area that is also used for discourse activities), in terms of people (normally there are only around five people working here—now it’s more, of course, because we’re producing the project for the Dutch Pavilion at the Venice Biennale) and in terms of funding. I see BAK as a grid of possibilities rather than anything else in institutional terms, where the minimal structure provided, offers extreme flexibility and capability to accommodate what we see is at stake in our contemporaneity. This does not only mean reacting to what is happening around us; this also means activating meanings that we believe might assist us in seeing things differently and bringing them inside the discourse.

I have often used the metaphor of the military ‘base’ in the past to explain the abstract picture of how we try to work, yet more and more I think it is difficult to use the comparison, as the world is at war nowadays. Yet, there are a handful of terms from military vocabulary we have adopted in art in that respect; consider *strategy*, *tactics* even *avant-garde*... However if you think of a military base, it is a place that is well prepared in times of peace, with trained and motivated people, ‘artillery’ and courage; it is all there in a state of constant preparedness, awaiting the stimuli to employ all its capabilities. In the moment when it is needed, this prepared matrix transforms into a unit of operations, flexible towards the needs of the concrete situation. In our fortunate case that essential signal comes from artists or intellectuals, or simply from issues we think we would like to engage with in a serious way

AW: BAK developed from an initial state of ‘openness’ to a certain level of ‘preparedness’ that you have obtained by working through a variety of critically engaged projects, which have become larger and wider in scope as you went along?

MH: Yes, the state of ‘preparedness’ is crucial, as I also addressed in the book we published on the occasion of *Becoming Oneself* in 2002. This reflects a willingness to be open to new impulses and that, in turn, translates in our programming in many ways. We are not a traditional ‘presentation organisation’ (*presentatie instelling*). We aren’t making exhibitions within the logic of a ‘conveyor belt,’ as most art institutions do in my view, filling the space in a never-ending loop, serving the demands of the spectacle and of neoliberalism. On the contrary, we want to look at how, in the face of political demands of this kind, we can preserve the idea of a public space for which we want to claim responsibility.

To some extent, having our base in Utrecht allows for ways of working that would be hard to imagine in larger cities, I think. One could view what we do as something at the intersection of a contemporary art centre and a research institute. We seek a different balance between exhibitions and other projects. Not that we do something what other institutions don’t—as talks, lectures, discussions and publications have all become commonplace in the field of contemporary art. Yet the exhibition doesn’t pioneer our agenda; our discourse activities are not derived from the shows we make, but are on an equal footing with them. Simply put, the projects we choose to engage with define the format, but as they are usually all research projects, they involve many facets—from reading groups to a series of lectures or talks or exhibitions to publications.

AW: This is reflected in the programme and pace of BAK in general, but equally in each individual project—where each project is a new ‘subject’ that is loaded onto the ongoing train of “producing, creating, presenting and analysing contemporary art,” to quote from the mission statement of BAK. In my view, BAK isn’t a train that only produces a lot of things, but which also accumulates a lot of information and knowledge as content along the way. How do these different activities relate to each other and how do the projects or subjects that are added to the train inform its route?

MH: I like the metaphor you use, but the answer to your question is more difficult to articulate. BAK’s programme probably appears like a train, as it is a chain of activities that feed on one another in the process of research and development of a particular subject in the realm of art, although not in a linear way. Generally we take a long time to deal with issues that interest us, as it is a process in which we try to figure out lots of different questions, viewed from as many angles as we can think of. We don’t deal with the notion of ‘war’ today and with something else tomorrow. The method of continuous questioning is crucial to us, as well as the essential question that we always carry in parallel to any subject we engage with: why do we discuss these things in art, or how does art relate to the complexities of the contemporary world, or simply, what’s art got to do

with all this? Because, if you deal with social and political issues, or even simply with the issues of social and political theory that you want to bring into artistic discourse, you easily get misunderstood, not to mention that you really run a risk of abusing art, or falling into a grey zone of ‘embedded political activism.’ We want to stay attuned to these threats and be open about our own worries and vulnerability in the process. In the project *Concerning War* (2005–6), for example, we took a lot of time to research before we felt we were ready to debate the issues of the contemporary world at war in public. It is rather easy today to assemble a show on war. I mean, one can put some works together, and you see many exhibitions that seem to be put together through a kind of Google search. This is not a method for us. We try to develop a foundation of knowledge through different means and we only make an exhibition when we think we have something to say. We don’t want to make an exhibition on ‘war’ to display it or to recreate its spectacle.

AW: In many texts written for BAK you speak of ‘urgency’; a certain subject is raised with urgency, or is urgent in itself. Is this urgency implied or instigated by the field of art and artistic reflection? Do you see it arise from the contemporary world, or even the need of contemporary neoliberalist society for such a rethinking or reimagining through art?

MH: That’s a crucial question. And there’s no one clear answer for it. It very much depends on the concrete project, where it starts from or where a subject originates. The mechanisms of how things come about are so very diverse. But I guess I could say that I just believe that artistic and intellectual practices are simply part of this world, and as such articulate it in manifold ways. Along with ‘urgency’ we also speak of ‘concern’—as was the case with *Concerning War* or *Concerning Knowledge Production* (2006). We often begin with what our ‘matter of concern’ is and from there try to develop things further. To be concrete, if you think about the subject of war, it concerns us all, everyone—notwithstanding your political, social, geographic, religious, economic, national or any other position in this world. Regardless of your opinion about or stance towards the subject, you *are* concerned with it, or rather it is concerning you. In that way, it also concerns artists, theorists, writers...

AW: I understand that, and I also agree to a certain extent, it all forms part of a shared field of concerns, but there are still artists, and there are intellectuals

MH: And there are artist-intellectuals...

AW: and curators... each having their own personal practice. Do they need each other in the process of working with these urgent subjects? In other words, do artists need intellectuals to be involved or vice versa? We have seen quite a lot of interdisciplinary exchange between and approaches by artists, but also the academic world, or even politicians, seek the involvement of artists in social or scientific matters. What is the position of the (independent) curator?

MH: Well, these divisions might not necessarily be helpful. I believe we all are immersed in practices that involve both creativity and knowledge production simultaneously. I sometimes use the trope of the ‘public intellectual’ to explain what I believe our place in society might be, whether we are artists, scholars, writers or cultural practitioners in general. Though again, I’m aware this is bringing a new set of uncertainties into the discussion.

Yet, if you ask me about the position of a curator, I would have to say I’ve become rather sceptical about that notion and the possibilities this entails. The 1990s, the decade of the ‘curator’ one could say, produced a few powerful curatorial figures, but I would not be able to say what it contributed to the field of arts besides this weird notion of stardom and spectacle, which essentially nourishes the market and not the public sphere; with few exceptions, of course, that one has to cherish. That made

me believe in the art institution instead, where I see much greater potential in providing a space for art and cultural practitioners and the audience for debating the world that is not quite possible in many other places within society, at least not to my knowledge and in my experience. An art institution allows for the continuity and consistency that I fear is otherwise lacking in the field.

AW: You mention another rather important category here. Who is your audience?

MH: The audience of BAK is primarily a professional audience (in the Netherlands) in the field of art and intellectual production with a strong emphasis on those involved in both these fields. I think what makes our audience different from a typical art centre's audience is that we attract people interested in theory and politics and the possibilities that art brings forth in this respect. This has to do with the fact that we believe art is where a complex network of aesthetic, cultural, political, social and economic discourses intersect and become empowered in unexpected ways.

AW: And more generally, who do you consider to be, and how do you address, your audience?

MH: Audience is a particular question that we feel we have to engage with, especially in times when a large number of art institutions allow the cheap rhetoric of populism to define these matters. In order to seek a counter-position within this, we once defined our policy as a 'zero-visitor policy'—not to be confused with 'zero-audience' or 'zero-public'—as a way to 'protest' the politician's mantra of judging based on body count at the door. We absolutely subscribe to the idea of hospitality within our institution, yet we do not allow visitor numbers to rule our way of working. We work with 'audience' in a much more structured way. Part of our audience consists of the people who actually come to our exhibitions and talks and different types of gatherings. There's a second audience that we connect with through our publications: we, for example, do not print invitation cards but publish small booklets that we send out. This doesn't replace a real encounter with art, but it does provide a possibility to encounter our way of thinking about it. These publications include a text, essay or an interview, images and all other information and knowledge that we think is important to communicate. Of course, one can reach a much larger, international audience in this way than in the physical encounter, especially when working in a relative periphery. Many art institutions experience the fact that although you operate locally, your 'second' audience is very important, and often even extraordinarily influential.

AW: You didn't mention the website of BAK in this regard; it hosts an incredible amount of information, produced knowledge, an archive of lectures and conferences etc.

MH: Besides all the information that any website contains, we invested ourselves in building a video archive of our discourse-driven projects, as well as a research area. We always strive to provide as much information as possible and that includes our preparatory work and research, all of which offer a view into our way of working and developing the project. If you want to deal with a particular issue we have been engaged with, you can begin with a reading list or texts on our website. It is used quite intensely I have to say, even within the academic context; we found out that some universities list part of our website as literature to refer to within their curriculum. We see this as an extended audience of BAK, a very important one actually. This also reflects the fact that we really want to function as a research institute. As I said before, we do see art as a serious place where the issues of the world can be addressed and everything we do is informed by that belief.

AW: With regards to the project *Concerning Knowledge Production*, you produced a really impressive amount of content. There seems to me to actually be a third audience beside the physical and the international audience, and that consists of yourself, of all the various participants, artists, theorists, intellectuals, etc. in the projects—especially the larger ones.

MH: Indeed, BAK's 'larger' projects are usually developed as multifaceted undertakings. The starting point is often an urgency, an interest in an issue that is of importance generally, for society if you will; and then we try to connect to other fields of knowledge to fill in the gaps for ourselves. This brings people together within the area of interest, people who are eager to develop a position towards issues where we see urgencies. I guess this is rather difficult to explain, but our projects are developed in such a way that they are an endeavour for ourselves—involving artists, curators, members of reading and discussion groups, etc.—a means of exploring issues that we genuinely feel we need to tackle instead of 'showing' others what is already known.

AW: If artistic practice is taking the complexities of the contemporary world as its concern, what is it putting back into this world? In the discussions of *Concerning Knowledge Production* you talked about knowledge and 'non-knowledge' implying the underlying, untold, often highly individual stories. Does this non-knowledge or sort of undercurrent of stories, 'go back where it came from' to inform the place, society, community which found it?

MH: I do not see art as a space that necessarily needs to 'produce' in a traditional sense, or to 'return' something to society. If there is something we contribute, then it is a space where the world can be looked at differently, imagined in another way than neoliberal logic prescribes. Yet, if we believe we are firmly part of the world and not looking at it from the safety of an ivory tower, we are also not borrowing anything that needs to be returned, are we? *Concerning Knowledge Production* was put together because we thought it was crucial to address our mode of working. We realized that words like 'research' or 'knowledge' have become commonplace in the field of art without serious reflection and analysis. We heard ourselves speaking about 'research' until the moment somebody asked if we could name an artist whose work is not embedded in research . . . We could not answer. These are good moments to pause and create space and time to rethink our own hypotheses and methods. If we believe in criticality, it is crucial not to exempt ourselves from that attitude. *Concerning Knowledge Production* was precisely an attempt at this.

AW: With reference to art being firmly embedded in the world: realistically, a lot of people don't ever get in touch with art, or even have access to artistic or critical practice. So it very much remains within the field...

MH: I don't think within this way of working this is necessarily an issue. We are a tiny institution that wants to address things and even be ahead of things, and I don't think that connects to this pseudo-democratic idea of 'art for all.' I think we have to stop feeling guilty about not being able to speak to everybody, at least not in a direct way.

AW: Besides intuition, which you mentioned before, is there an element of self-organisation embedded in BAK, with regards to your having had to create a place for your practice, and having to create that place in the Dutch art scene as well as the fact that you needed to follow your own ambition and address broader developments in the contemporary (art) world?

MH: After I moved to the Netherlands in 2000, for a while I really didn't know what to do. I always thought that art needs to respond to urgencies, like those found in the context where I come from, but here it seemed nobody believed there were any urgencies to address. Or perhaps I could not quite grasp what was at stake, mainly because everyone around me seemed very blasé about how great things were. It takes time to understand certain things once you move to a new context.

AW: *Becoming Oneself* was the first of a series of what you call multifaceted projects organised at BAK, questioning the position of art and more specifically the position of the art institution. There

were other major projects that specifically aimed to consider the role of art in relation to world-wide urgencies, as you refer to them, implying also the contradictory status of the individual in a globalised capitalist society... was that a starting point for these projects in general?

MH: You can say it this way, yes. Maintaining, or even re-creating, a public sphere is a crucial task in a world where true public space, outside of the realm of commerce, is dwindling. We need the public sphere as a site for a non-violent clash of different worldviews, as a site of 'fearless speech.'

AW: Would you consider the W3 (www) as another potential space for non-violent interaction? There is a broad set of communities that are actively socially and critically involved on the Internet, whereby critical reflection and the production of form is very closely related and can in a very direct ways respond to each other—I'm also referring here to what Brian Holmes stated in *A Prior Magazine* #13. Holmes positions himself as an interface between the technical and the everyday. He states: "the cultural critic has to avoid reiterating the basic proposals of his discursive enclosure and set of rules through the challenges of politically engaged artistic practice, through the ethic of embodiment." Do you, and if so how, feel the necessity to avoid the codification or standardisation of the terms in which a certain subject becomes formulated—as you very consciously do not position yourself as an interface, you connect but you don't stand in between?

MH: The question is whether one needs to think in those terms. I don't necessarily see these as important. I see my voice as one of many within a larger scope of thinking and possibilities, as opposed to an interface—what I described as accommodating different practices next to each other, interlinked but not dependent on one another. The Internet is not more than another site and I am careful not to overestimate its possibilities.

AW: The projects *Concerning War* and *Concerning Knowledge Production* aren't related to a specific place—as we're not talking about physical war or exact knowledge, but the implications of them... How do you address these issues specifically?

MH: Perhaps the issues aren't specifically related to where we are—although one could argue about this—but the way we tackle them is certainly co-defined by where we speak from. That's where the difference is. I do think that, if we were located in a large metropolis, different formats and different contents would be appropriate. We take advantage of the scale of a city like Utrecht, which allows for a different pace and a different concentration, and doesn't require spectacle in my opinion... This gives us the opportunity to break the projects down into smaller parts and allows different kinds of in-depth analysis. For example, we've had reading and discussion groups with a small number of people and these are the most intense talks you can imagine. We also had a series of one-day seminars that allowed things that large exhibitions do not provide an opportunity for. The funding system at the moment in the Netherlands is still also something that allows you to go in-depth, rather than count revenues at the end of the day and answer to a commercial sponsor, for example. Those are really the things that define a practice, perhaps more than we tend to believe.

AW: It is also about the way that you formulate the things that you do. In the lecture series accompanying *Concerning Knowledge Production*, concerning the artist as 'public intellectual,' it was stated: "Art reaches beyond what could ever be articulated through language alone, however attempting to theoretically explore its complexity remains a crucial task. This is precisely where art might attain a critical position and potential in the contemporary world." Is the image on its own too silent?

MH: Of course it is not silent. What we meant to say in the text you quote was actually the opposite, suggesting there is more to art than what we are able to say about it. Yet one cannot reduce art to

'image' either. In an attempt to grasp its complexities, we felt we had no other option but to keep challenging the limitations before us.

The idea of the artist as public intellectual is a trope we used to suggest the place of the artist in society. Put simply, it suggests that artists, while speaking from the field of arts, might strive to achieve a platform in the public sphere about matters of public interest. It is about employing the grammar of art in the public landscape, one could say, or put differently, about speaking to the world about the world through artistic practice. I would like to believe this is what we do.

AW: That's where it differs from activism?

MH: In some way... I recall discussing the question of critical art versus activism with Martha Rosler for the *Concerning War* critical reader and I really think she formulates the distinction in a very interesting and precise way. She speaks of activism as a practice that aims to "engage the public directly in questions of political affairs and political governance and motivate them to act." The difference resides in an orientation toward a definable goal in the world, and "art is rarely so directed." Although chances are that these two practices might occasionally intersect or overlap in one way or another, both the 'audience' and 'expectations' are simply different. While activism implies action, artistic practice is not strangled by such demands.

This is a very simple but beautiful way to put it. Thus, if we engage with issues of war in our project, it is to create a space for another type of imaginary than that which we're used to, to confront the status quo and the authority of what appears to be the general consensus on how things are. It is rather about imagining alternatives, thinking about what things could be. Art has this possibility. A possibility to speculate about, or dream even, of another world. Without being prescriptive, of course.

AW: To go on from there, the aims of the socially and politically engaged avant-gardes of the last century have been tried and tested. Their methods have become part and parcel of the dominant language of art and culture, which Brian Holmes again in *A Prior Magazine* #13 referred to as 'cognitive capitalism.' How do you position yourself towards these looming dominant structures and languages?

MH: In other words, you are referring to 'embedded political activism'... I am not quite sure if there is a way to escape this and whether we should waste time in doing that at all. Art is structurally anchored in the main narratives of contemporary capitalism in various ways, from its economic manifestations on the one hand to it being a site of harmless—perhaps even welcome—critique on the other. The key might lie in committing to creating a public sphere through art in an era that insists on the notion of private.

AW: Is the voice of art in this construction rendered harmless?

MH: It is. Yet one should perhaps demand that any construction is temporary, thus the idea of insisting on articulating a different voice within all this deserves some exploration. It belongs to our possibilities within the negotiation of this trajectory of becoming.

AW: Are we witnessing another step in the contradictory but unavoidable relationship between art, life and its institutions? One where the institutions are not taking in or affirming critical practice, but are becoming the practitioners of an engaged artistic practice themselves?

MH: Have we already become an art institution? [laughs]. For one, I'm a believer that, when it comes to art institutions, when taken seriously, they can become activators of things and maybe even of changes. There are a lot of possible trajectories in what we refer to as 'institutional creativity,' and BAK clearly isn't the only example. There are other people and places that engage in this process of reformulating the ideals of the art institution: Charles Esche at Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven or Vasif Kortun at Platform Garanti in Istanbul and a few others. However, the institutional landscape has been changing, often in sync with directors who come and go. I am very interested in thinking about how to think and work beyond this limitation.

AW: Institutional practice is related to the transitional state of current artistic directors and curators; who is where at what moment determines where the challenges are?

MH: Alex Farquharson in his recent article (*Frieze* 101, September 06) discussed a number of issues related to 'new institutionalism,' as he called it, and he indeed connects this to personalities in the field. He makes a connection between the figure of the free-lance curator in the 1990s and the shift to institutions towards the end of the decade.

Of course, art institutions *are* the people that work with them. Given the logic of our times, it is all about loaning the directors' dream to the institution as it were, which is by definition temporary. I assume it is fine to offer a four-year or so contract to directors, to ensure liveliness and—do they call it 'fresh air'?—for the institution. Yet, this involves the idea of working with the institution in order to enhance the curriculum vitae of the director so as to secure the next job. There should be a construction from which the institution also benefits, so it is the matter of both a threat and a challenge. The question of the sustainability and continuity of the art institution is at stake here, obviously. It's the same when it comes to the network of your partners and collaborators in a larger context of other institutions.

AW: Who do you consider to be your partners and collaborators then in the Netherlands and surrounding countries? Could you describe the network in which BAK operates?

MH: The Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, as I already mentioned, De Appel with Ann Demeester and Witte de With with Nicolaus Schafhausen, but also MuHKA in Antwerp with Bart de Baere, even the Brussels Biennale with Barbara Vanderlinden, and I would also hope for a future cooperation with Extra City, the Ludwig Museum in Cologne and the Kunstverein in Düsseldorf. Given what I just discussed, most of the middle-field institutions on this list have recently appointed new directors...

However, the networks we operate in do not only consist of other art institutions. We very actively try to reach out to universities: Utrecht University is a very important partner for us, as well as other types of institutes, like centres for social and political debate, for instance.

AW: There's this European Kunsthalle in Cologne being developed...

MH: Yes. The European Kunsthalle embarked on a similar journey as we did in 2001: negotiating its own parameters with their (future) audience through a series of talks, mainly with people involved with art institutions in one way or another, presenting models and possibilities. I discussed BAK within this series, under the subheading of the chances that working in a (relative) periphery bring along.

AW: The European Kunsthalle claims to be devoted to the goal of exploring potential models for a future kunsthalle (in Cologne)—a pioneering Kunsthalle. How would you envision the future of the art institution, what would be the terms it should be articulated around?

MH: I am afraid I do not have another theory besides the one that I'm trying to implement in reality with BAK. I defined for this process two terms that I consider crucial in any such effort: *preparedness* and *indefinite*. 'Preparedness' as willingness to accommodate the challenges posed before us, being ready, being prepared for use or action and 'indefinite' as the notion of 'yet to be,' or what is to come. In that sense, an art institution would be nothing more but a matrix of possibilities that would need to be gone about responsibly. If I were to add other terms towards what an institution must be, I would think of modesty and hospitality, the latter being something that Charles Esche has theorized and written about intensively.

AW: Should the art institution take on some kind of ideological stance?

MH: There is no position possible without ideology. Without one, the art institution is an empty shell unprepared to reference anything, pretending it just needs to be filled—with whatever.

AW: It is interesting that your plans with the Dutch pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale take on a shape similar to the projects you develop at BAK—you will produce a new work with Aernout Mik, publish a critical reader and organise a series of talks and discussions in collaboration with institutions like the Van Abbemuseum and Witte de With—even though the Venice Biennale traditionally isn't really the place to present such critical practice and rarely, if ever, acts as a part of a larger project. How do you envision this project?

MH: Perhaps it would be good to name a few starting points for how this project was envisioned. I am of course aware of the complexities and contradictions a large-scale perennial exhibition such as the Venice Biennale brings with it. It carries a populist agenda, insists on national representation, feeds on spectacle and the market. Yet one cannot deny its importance. I tried to remember outstanding and powerful moments from my memory of past Biennales that I visited. Of course there were good artists with better or worse projects, but what I immediately remembered were the works that did not treat national pavilions as yet another neutral exhibition place, but for what they are: national pavilions. Think only about Hans Haacke in the German pavilion in 1992! Or Ilya Kabakov in the Russian Pavilion, Santiago Sierra in the Spanish one—the one that none of us non-Spanish nationals had seen... One of course can—and must—remain critical in debating these works, but they are definitely inscribed in my memory as important instances. I wanted to deal with this idea of national representation quite seriously and that connected to the discussions I had with Aernout Mik as we were developing another project together at that time. We were talking about traditional *citizenry*, fear, the state of exception and, of course, immigration. This is not unrelated to my position in the Netherlands as a foreigner who is running a public institution, acting in a political way yet not having political rights in a traditional sense—as I don't have a Dutch passport I'm not able to vote. We both felt we wanted to use this opportunity to bring a number of issues around the nation-state into discussion. However, instead of a traditional solo exhibition with a catalogue, we decided to produce a new work that deals with the issues of the nation-state as well as publish a critical reader to discuss the issues that Mik brings up through his work in an in-depth manner. We also wanted to avoid the three-day, pre-opening frenzy for professionals being the only time the project would be discussed, and so we are 'extending' the Pavilion through the creation of an intelligent platform where discussion and debate about these issues and the Biennale can actually go on for the entire duration of the Biennale in Venice, until November. These discussions will take place in Holland—we're extending the project in the Pavilion from Venice to the Netherlands (in Utrecht, with the University; in Eindhoven at the Van Abbemuseum in conjunction with

Be(com)ing Dutch, a project that deals with the same issues of ‘Dutchness’ and nationalism and national citizenship; and in Rotterdam in collaboration with Witte de With, which is also producing the German Pavilion with Isa Genzken, curated by Nicolaus Schafhausen—they will be developing a series of talks on national representation in collaboration with us, as it is interesting to see that the German Pavilion would be produced in the Netherlands).

The work of Aernout Mik will be carried out as an eight-screen installation, consisting of three works and an architectural intervention into the Pavilion, under the title *Citizens and Subjects*. Put simply, traditionally citizens are those who have rights related to belonging to a nation-state; subjects are those who don’t. The starting point is a work *Training Ground* (2006) where Mik looks at how the police are trained to deal with refugees. The atmosphere in the work is rather fluid in the beginning and then at a certain point it changes, bringing along questions of whether this is still ‘just’ a training, a performance or a real situation. Sets of actors (some perform the police and some the refugees) are all stand-ins, but they swap roles and people start to become kind of possessed. Here Mik brings in a ‘quote’ from Jean Rouch’s 1955 film *Les Maitres Fous (Mad Masters)*, wherein the director followed the Hauka movement in Africa, a group of people who regularly gather to ‘re-live’ the trauma of their colonial past in order to attempt to overcome it. They divide themselves into the colonizers and the colonized and perform their roles; it is really a possession cult, but it is also an important instance of cultural resistance: to overcome a drama of the past through re-enacting, mimicking, simulation and parody. In my view, Mik uses a similar strategy, dividing the actors on the set into policemen and refugees so as to connect, not only the colonial past and immigration issues, but also to seek a way to overcome this trauma. It is important to mention how Mik works with actors when filming: he does not offer a scenario, script or a possibility to rehearse; rather what he seeks are the relations and narratives that ‘happen’ through interaction among the people involved. What evolves through scenes is thus rather a fantasy of how the police are trained than a training that would be close to reality. When we were researching how the police are really being trained to deal with refugees, we realised that such a training category doesn’t exist on its own; it belongs to a larger framework for training the police to deal with threats and emergencies. Documentary footage from such trainings, as well as real situations, became part of the second work, *Convergencies* (2007). The third piece, *Mock Up* (2007), is a fictional work filmed in Marnehuizen, the largest military exercise village in Europe, where Mik searches for ways in which a new political community can emerge. With this he undermines the dichotomy between (the status of the) citizen and subject by saying: if we negotiate our future through military and police preparation we are actually all just subjected to the same reality. He is suggesting that the line between subjection to this reality and potential liberation is not as fixed as we tend to imagine. So in the end, there is a very hopeful proposition.

The subjects raised by Mik are further discussed in a critical reader, a publication that ‘substitutes’ for the traditional glossy catalogue. I invited Charles Esche and Rosi Braidotti, a professor at Utrecht University known for her work in the field of gender studies who mainly deals with biopolitics, to co-edit the reader with me. So while Mik is speaking about the nation-state in general—or perhaps rather about our ‘western condition,’ we thought: why don’t we speak about Dutchness? Entitled *Citizens and Subjects: The Netherlands for example*, the reader presents propositions by writers, political and social scientists and philosophers based in the Netherlands who write about issues of fear, (illegal) immigration and refugees and analyse critically the mechanisms at play in maintaining the current consensus. Picking up one the main issues in Mik’s work, the texts ground the abstract principles of citizens and subjects in the concrete social axes of ethnicity, nationalism, gender and religion. At the same time, they explore the potential for new emancipatory thinking and question whether art could be a space to reimagine current forms of subjection. In the case of the Netherlands a lot of issues come up, for instance the famous Dutch tolerance of the past versus current indifference, the unresolved history of Dutch colonialism, the

cases of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Theo van Gogh and Pim Fortuyn, Islamic imagery and the rise of Islamophobia, the emergence of the rhetoric of 'new realism' and many other topics. The reader includes nine texts and seven conversations with artists, of which Mik is one.

AW: Do you strive for an actual impact on political and intellectual debate in the Netherlands?

MH: I think the project itself is already part of a debate that is very important to have in the field of art, which I hope we will be able to carry on throughout the duration of the Biennale.

AW: You mentioned several times that "we have to take risks." Didn't you receive an award for risk-taking projects and experimental thinking from the American Center Foundation?

MH: When I speak about risk, I usually mean the risks of stepping into the public sphere, vulnerable and humble, with questions and dilemmas rather than answers and solutions. We've been supported and recognized for our work from many fronts, and of course I'm very grateful for that.

AW: What are your next projects, what comes after the biennale?

MH: You mean 'is there life after the biennale?' There are a number of things I am researching at the moment. I'm looking into the issue of Islamic imagery and current notions of the 'secular' or the 'post-secular' even. These issues have yet to be addressed through concentrated research in contemporary art, I believe. Another project is a large international research undertaking looking at the twentieth anniversary of 1989, a year that marked the collapse of the bipolar world. There is not enough understanding, in my opinion, about what the impact of this wave of revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe was worldwide. There are a large number of projects coming up to celebrate the liberation in the former communist part of Europe, but I believe that we need to change the rhetoric finally and divorce ourselves from the notion of 'Eastern Europe,' with all the residues of Cold War language and exoticism. I think, that in the wake of a large number of projects that looked at the former East, we need to change the perspective and focus on what has actually been happening in the 'former West.' How has Western Europe and North America changed after having lost the status of the universal 'winner' in the Cold War battle? What has been going on? We are going to develop the research part of this 'Former West' project at BAK, and we hope to do a large exhibition in one of the former western centres, such as Cologne, London or New York as well as produce a substantial reader about these issues and the developments in individual countries that belong to the so-called West.

AW: Turning everything around...

MH: You know... during past nearly twenty years, as someone who does come from Eastern Europe, I did nothing else but run from conference to conference explaining what was happening in the east and I think it is crucial to shift the focus and see what's been happening in the west. I mean: can you in an abstract way actually define what kind of developments took place? It's a huge undertaking about which I'm incredibly excited because I think there is a chance to discuss something very important.