

Smart Culture Working Conference

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Artist contributions: Jonas Staal, Jeremiah Day, Yvonne Dröge-Wendel

By Brenda Tempelaar

Attending the *Smart Culture Working Conference*, I focus on forms of knowing that the artist-researchers specify in their presentations, and how this knowledge is articulated. Perhaps it is due to my preoccupation with rhetorics that my mind immediately wanders off to a particularity of artistic research that I discovered as a master student. Advice, in this hybrid discipline, is frequently articulated negatively. Don't be pretentious. Don't take your own work as the subject of your research. Don't quote Deleuze and please, don't blather. Contrary to my expectations, the dynamics of artistic research were remarkably close to those of the market. Think of Jerry Salz' advice for example, on Instagram:

*"Artists: Have you ever used the word "nature" "culture" or "interrogate" or "problematize" in an Artist Statement? / **Don't!** / And maybe not "practice" unless you really must. / Have you ever quoted a French, German or Russian philosopher/theoretician? / **Don't!** / Write how you talk. Use your own syntax. / If you loved magic growing up and that made you an artist, say so. / Keep it simple, stupid. / No more than 125-words are more than enough. / Get to the point; no heady throat-clearing or cosmic-clarifications. / **Don't** blather about "challenging assumptions", "being transgressive" or even use the words "post" anything, maybe. / Jesus! It should take you 30-minutes max. Max."*

Salz was probably not thinking of artistic research when he wrote that. But it shows that no matter from which side you are approaching it, art or academia, research in the arts is illuminated by warning lights. Negatively put advice comes to define the discipline, if its practitioners don't carefully choose their words. It is so much easier to mark the spectrum of a new discipline with red flags than to report from within.



Image credit: Ilya Rabinowitz

Jonas Staal: *To Make a World: Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*

The first artist presentation of the day is by Jonas Staal. His talk takes place in the theatre, where Staal's speech is delivered from behind the lecture stand. The organisation of the talk instantly connects it to speeches by politicians, or scholarly lectures. A lecture stand is ceremonial in itself: the only time I saw it being used in art school was on diploma day. Beamed onto the screen behind him is a classic slideshow of images, most of which are documentary images of recent exhibitions or research findings. This formal presentation suits him, and sets up the audience for the rhetorics to come, as they play a major role in his research.

When he writes, his earnest tone of voice sometimes takes the form of a manifesto, while the visual language deployed in his exhibitions is akin to architecture and social interventions. As his respondent Nav Haq, curator of M HKA, points out afterwards: "unlike the rest of us, Jonas Staal is not blinded in the headlights." What he means to say is that Staal is able to focus, in a media landscape of distractions. His thesis *To Make a World: Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* deals with the relation between art, democracy and propaganda. It explores the ways in which art was subordinated to political power play. Many of his articles were published by *e-flux*, and I read a recent essay of his in *De Groene Amsterdammer*, which I believe was not even in the art section. His doctorate moves beyond the walls of the research institute, playing an international role in political debates. Navigating between exhibitions, essays and artist talks like today, Staal's combined research contributes to our understanding of art and how it can engage in constructing new understandings of power.

The first image shown is a rendering of *Democracy*: Henry Dreifuss' utopian city-of-the-future housed by the Theme Center of the 1939 New York World Fair. The image serves as an example of a capitalist bubble, a subject frequently talked about by Staal. The interior display of this utopian model was experienced walking on a moving sidewalk while a slide presentation was projected onto the dome of the sphere. After exiting, visitors could descend to ground level via a spiral ramp that partially encircled the Perisphere. By showing this image, Staal introduces his claim that utopian plans for the urban fabric are political mechanisms of control.

Talking about the performance of power as art, Staal's talks addresses media coverage of the election of Trump and the news channel of Islamic State. His words relate to democracy, capitalism, propaganda, power, and state abstraction. I notice that he is a frequent user of utopian verbs, such as 'build' and 'imagine'. Creation, to paraphrase him briefly, is not merely a message sent into the world but an attempt to affect that world. Art, according to Staal, is an alternative headspace, from which an actual effect can be exerted onto the world it questions.

Research, in Staal's work, seems to involve a lot of newspaper reading. By extensively informing himself on the subject matter, Staal obtained a position of mediator between the general public and hidden trails of media coverage. "If you do not know who Sarah Palin is, I envy you deeply", he remarks. The audience laughs. But there is an important truth enclosed in the concept of this joke: by engaging in this long-term research trajectory of the doctorate, Staal's knowledge of shifts in democracy and media coverage has taken on exceptional forms, giving rise to a persona of expertise.

His expertise becomes apparent for example in the images he shows from an exhibition he organised at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam, open to the public from April to September 2018. *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* was a collected screening of propaganda films made by Steve Bannon, prior to becoming Donald Trump's chief strategist and senior counselor. I recall my visit to the exhibition, browsing the attic space that is awkwardly divided into narrow corridors. I remember wondering how it happened that almost everyone knows who Steve Bannon is, but that his artistic output remains an obscure detail in his biography.

Besides extending his knowledge of a topic beyond the average, it characterises Staal's research methods to portray narratives firsthand. That's what he did by providing a stage for Steve Bannon instead of responding to his work himself (he could have also made a work about it). He also uses this method of staging protagonists in his ongoing project *New World Summit*. In his talk, he addresses two iterations of the summit, one at BAK Utrecht and the other in Rojava. In *New World Summit*, he invites organisations outside of the democratic system to gather. The image on the screen depicts a group of people inside an oval shaped wooden construction, with printed maps, and graphic signs indicating the different participants. The summit focuses on the use of so-called designated lists of terrorist organisations, which are employed to systematically ban and isolate organisations from the political order. It facilitated representatives of the Kurdish Women's Movement, the Basque Independence Movement, the National Liberation Movement of Azawad and the National Democratic Movement of the Philippines, as well as lawyers, public prosecutors, judges and governmental advisors involved in high profile cases after the passing of the Patriot Act in the United States. It resists the rise of military and colonial stakes and a hunger for expansion under the flag of democracy and freedom, known, to speak with Staal's words, as the war against terror.

Staal's gatherings, exhibitions and texts warn of the power of the image. His aim is to convince the public that whatever it is that we perceive as reality, is altered. Accompanying Al-Furqan-media and Donald Trump in his repertoire are topics like Breitbart, fake news, post truth, white propaganda, black propaganda and cinema of terror. Addressing these topics I see a confident man, glancing over the audience with a sense of austerity in his voice. He reminds me of the comment Ann Demeester made in the morning, when she was being interviewed as an expert on transdisciplinary curating: "Research should be curious, critical and vulnerable." But where is Jonas Staal's vulnerability? Is it in the absence of an art object? Why are we willing to accept that Staal's practice is art? His research clearly functions without the parameters of art as well, so why stick to that confine of the artistic practice?

Staal's respondent Nav Haq takes the audience on a somewhat unexpected diversion by linking Staal to two art historical reference points. First, Haq links Staal's interest in propaganda to Joseph Beuys' use of alternative facts. This reference points at Beuys being shot down from a plane in the Crimea, where, so he claimed, he was saved by Tatar tribesmen, who wrapped him in insulating layers of felt and fat to keep him from freezing to death. By now, this narrative has been conclusively disproved. Beuys was in a plane crash, which killed his pilot and badly injured him, but there were no tribesmen, no fat nor felt. It's not clear why he invented the Tatar rescue, particularly since in later life he was irritated by how frequently it was used as a Rosetta stone for decoding his idiosyncratic and remarkable artistic language. It may be that he was deliberately evading responsibility for his part in Germany's programme of total war, though it's also possible that he was, like many artists, simply engaging in an act of bombastic self-creation.

Albeit a slight diversion, this reference does help to focus on the artistic side of Staal's research. The mention of Beuys, whose actions are widely accepted as being a relevant artistic practice to this day, serves as a legitimisation. As if the presence of Beuys makes it easier for the audience to understand why Staal is being an artist when he invites Steve Bannon to the stage.

The second reference that Haq introduces remains unclear to me. He sees a connection between Staal and VALIE EXPORT's film *Invisible Adversaries* (1977). The film features Anna, an artist, who is obsessed with the invasion of alien doubles bent on total destruction. Her schizophrenia is reflected in the juxtapositions of long movie camera takes with violently edited montages: private with public spaces; black & white with colour, still photographs with video, earsplitting sounds with disruptive camera angles. I'm not sure what the connection is between this film and the work of Staal. Unfortunately, there is no time left for Staal to answer any of Haq's questions, if there were any. I'm left with a few of my own questions. Is there a limit to how much manifesto an artistic oeuvre can carry? Does artistic work necessarily serve a purpose that is not a public function? Is art a relevant framework from which to question the war on terror?



Image credit: Ilya Rabinowitz

Jeremiah Day: A Kind of Imagination that has Nothing to Do with Fiction: Art in Public Life

Jeremiah Day uses the format of the presentation itself to verbalise his interpretation of artistic research. Before starting his talk, he reduces the theatre to the size of a narrow and intimate setting behind the center stage. He gathers the audience around a table non-hierarchically, surrounding him as he invites them to an open discussion about the relationship between freedom of speech and art.

He states that it is in reference to Allan Kaprow to gather the people like that. Kaprow, both artist and writer, is one of the key figures in Day's thesis *A Kind of Imagination that has Nothing to Do with Fiction: Art in Public Life*. He is exemplary for what Day tried to achieve in his doctorate. Neither of Kaprow's two occupations, art and writing, was illustrative of the other. Also, Kaprow decided to go public with his concerns, and his work resisted art's reduction to a social function. Finally, the work of art remains central, something that Day values as well. As Day points out in his thesis, he is interested in Kaprow's way of departing from the work of art, using the context of art as an ongoing test for art's capacity to have public meaning.

"People like you either for your art or for your writing, but never for doing both", he summarises the introduction of his presentation. The first minutes of his talk at the conference are spent quickly summing up a longstanding tradition of artist writings and Day, whilst having already completed his thesis, still makes the impression that he has not fully resolved this concept of theory and practice having to justify each other. It reminds that the doctorate is not an answer to a question, but a continuous questioning that doesn't solidify the closer one gets towards the end. Day's doctorate has been a process of looking for meaning and contextualisation as much as he was trying to move away

from it. I wonder if that may be used as an explanation for the difference that exists between his artistic work and hearing him speak.

In studio 2, one of Day's performances is beamed onto the wall. It is to be described as a rambling monologue combined with improvised dance. It's theatrical, anecdotal and as always, there are lines of political history to be deciphered although the documentary is always simmering below the bodily, performative surface. Day's messages are conveyable both through bodily expressions such as rolling over the floor or waving with his arms, and through a charismatic form of speech, infused with Americanisms. Though it seems that these two messages are never fully corresponding. Day instrumentalises two *modi operandi* that speak two different languages, about two different subjects: politics, and being an artist. This incompatibility is easily linked to his comment that "the object is not necessarily the subject matter".

Like in his thesis, over the course of his presentation, Day changes subject multiple times. From artist writings he moves into the domain of freedom of speech. Are freedom of speech and art related to each other? If so, how? This 'if so, how so? If not, why not'-construction was borrowed from his thesis. He uses it to mark his critical approach, second-guessing the conventions in art and academia that we assume to be true.

Both his presentation at the conference and his thesis were prepared like a diary that traces the steps he took to get to the final form. There is a sense of drama in his approach, for which the final paragraph of his thesis may be illustrative. He ends four years of research with an anecdote of a night out, performing. He says to a friend: "this is it, this is the end of my PhD". Before writing that conclusive paragraph, Day's thoughts had gone towards editing a book about his collaboration partner in improvised dance, Simone Forti, or philosopher Hannah Arendt with whom he shares an interest in political totalitarian systems, or Fred Dewey who he shares an interest in public space with, and Amiri Baraka who also used drama and poetry to address racism and inequality.

The people that were influential for Day's thoughts on art and public life, also helped him gain a clear view on art institutions and their operating systems. Day warns the audience that "support is not always given by the ones who come up with the money". According to him, when somebody enrolls in a PhD-trajectory, a trade is being made. In return for his independence and intellectual freedom he says he had to engage in a deep, long-term commitment to an institution. It implies that there is some kind of loss in that trade, but it remains unclear what it is exactly, that an institution takes from you in that moment.

The monologue introducing his doctorate is relatively short, and Day seems keen on moving on to his recent interest in freedom of speech within the confines of art. The rest of the time is used talking amongst the group about whether or not it is useful to define artistic research. We talk about institutional collaborations and funding. According to Day, we have been unambitious so far, in dealing with research, defining it and claiming a space for it within the humanities. Moreover, he asks how it was possible that we did not put art itself at the base of the PhD? He wonders if artistic research is a legitimisation exercise, which is interesting in relation to what happened earlier on the day, when Nav Haq legitimised Jonas Staal's artistic decisions.

One of the reasons why there is a focus on legitimisation in artist-research, Day states, is that "culture has lost its category". He states this in reference to the rise of the creative industries that seemingly annexed culture in the Netherlands. Someone in the audience from NWO speaks up and states that the creative industries as a term was necessary to plug the pilot that funded Day's

research as well as that of the three other speakers of the day. She points out that our definition of creative industries may differ from NWO's definition: creative industries is everything in which copyright applies. She may very well be right, because when I hear 'creative industries' I think of Richard Florida, stating that the creative class is the driving force behind economic development in post-industrial cities.

The question of culture losing its category leads us towards a discussion about liberalism changing the educational system and the humanities in particular. Intriguing in that sense is Day's remark that "we lack a cultural argument". He claims that the humanities are trying to fit in rather than question things. This, he says, is a dangerous state to be in for any institution, and it renders the position of the researcher precarious as well. Strengthening his claim is his quotation of Chris Lorentz' book title "If you're so smart how come you're not rich?". This edited book about universities in The Netherlands is critical of liberalism as a cure for culture and warns of an unaccessible education system.

Day's respondent Felix Gmelin continues on the topic of the artist having to be more entrepreneurial. We discuss economic models for artists and someone in the audience remarks that economy itself is a cultural artefact, on which both Day and Gmelin seem to agree. Artistic research seems to have developed its own economic model, and it makes me think of funding applications. They literally say: all artists can apply, including painters, sculptors, filmmakers, performers and artistic researchers. It is telling that they're called last, they're excluded from any other categories, and they are mentioned in line with material definitions. It seems that Day is supportive of a more permanent definition of artistic research, because he thinks that it would enhance the social position of the artist-researchers, when applying for funding for instance, if we were more ambitious in framing our work. Audience member Sher Doruff challenges this viewpoint: "could you be very specific on your definition of artistic research?" she asks him, rhetorically. What she means to emphasise is "what is *your* definition?". For even though culture may have lost its category, most of us seem to agree that artistic research cannot and should not be described oppressively.

In line with what Doruff is saying, audience member and cultural theorist and filmmaker Mieke Bal makes a compelling case for artistic research to remain undefined: "let's keep playing with the term" she says, "for it is much better to be a good artist than a mediocre scholar".



Image credit: [Niek Hendrix](#)

Yvonne Dröge-Wendel: 'The Performative and Relational Abilities of Things'

I first heard of the artist Yvonne Dröge Wendel in school, when one of my classmates was copying fruit, phones and furniture with clay. Our teacher told us that Dröge Wendel married a cabinet in the '90s and at that time, it was one of the silliest things I had ever heard. But the truth is that Dröge Wendel was ahead of her time. Today, her playful and philosophical approach to our interactions with objects is more popular than ever. We even came up with a name for our relation to nature that is leaving a mark on climate and atmosphere: the anthropocene. More and more people are becoming interested in the question why we design things the way we do, and why we need so much 'stuff' to live our lives.

From marrying a cabinet, Dröge Wendel moved towards an interest in artificial intelligence, which is – despite the playful approach – the philosophical angle of her doctorate. The project centers around *Think Tank*, a utopian model for a space in which objects have the designated function to inform the visitors. It's a place of visual silence, ruling out visual noise so that whoever is in it is left with greyish-green objects and their human bodies and thoughts. Her project *Think Tank - The Performative and Relational Abilities of Things* is presented in the attic of Het Huis, where the artist-researcher covered the floor in a white material. I suppose this is done in order to make the room feel more cosy. The default design of this room is for the audience to sit in the terraced folding seats. Dröge Wendel strategically put several of her greyish-green objects in those seats, so that the default configuration is immediately destabilised upon entering the room. The objects are thick enough to stop one from sitting on them, and claim a space for themselves, as if in a dialogue with the people in the room. They are randomly dispersed across the room and several of them are on the white-covered floor, inviting the participants for a cross-legged presentation, close to the floor.

While most people remain seated in the regular area specified for audience, some people really have no problem adapting to their new material environments. The presentation format functions as a mirror, revealing our personalities with no place to hide. I am one of the people who stay put, and from where I am I have a good view on a situation unfolding in front of me. The object sitting in the row in front of me is placed between two men in grey suits. Both of them lean in at the same time,

resting their elbows comfortably on the object. It is unmistakably intimate, but the moment passes unnoticed. It's not that the object creates a relationship between them; it just highlights the relationship that we usually tend to ignore.

The presentation of the greyish-green objects successfully redirects the audience's attention to the tangible things surrounding us. It illustrates the research methods that Dröge Wendel uses in her doctorate. The way she describes it, the room is set up and the objects are invited into the conversation.

Before engaging in a conversation with the respondents and the audience, Dröge Wendel introduces herself and her oeuvre through a short film that was originally made for the context of the A.H. Heinekenprijs voor de Kunst that she won in 2016. One of the works featured in this film is *Black Ball*. Dröge Wendel made an enormous latex ball filled with air, with a diameter of three and a half meters and a seamless black felt cover. She used the ball to create events in different European cities. The film shows somewhat surreal footage of people pushing the Black Ball through the streets. The ball is rolling to a variety of specific locations – within buildings, in the streets, in the countryside – where local communities become actively involved in the performance. It results in a kind of game, allowing people to interact spontaneously with the object as it rolls along on its journey to another community.

Like the greyish-green objects in the room, the Black Ball itself does not have a specific meaning or function and has 'just enough qualities'. It is an entity that is of neutral significance, forming a point of connection between people and their environment, while at the same time its size dictates the rules and regulations of public order, which is a red line in the artist's oeuvre. The ball is a conversation piece, in the sense that it invites to dialogue like two elbows resting on the same object. The action is open to the participation of the people who come into contact with it. The plot develops in dialogue, unpredictable and playful, depending on the empathy and attitude of the co-creators. It leaves traces like drawings, photographs and written stories, which we should see as a performative relation.

After seeing *Black Ball* move, it becomes more interesting to take a closer look at the film shown in the background. The greyish-green objects are featured in a kind of exhibition space, while people wearing vibrantly colored clothes stumble in, over, under them. Their hands move across the fabric, familiarising themselves with the density of the material that is somehow unpredictable at first sight. You don't know if an object is a massage-chair until it starts to massage you. The undefined nature of the objects creates a sense of weightlessness, devoid of function, that forces one to rethink the functions ascribed to objects in our daily life.

I am interested in this film because it is positioned in between a work of art and a documentation of a performance. The registration is directed, pointing the gaze to the interest of the maker. This, in opposition to the object on display that is, once it touches the exhibition-floor, beyond the artist's control. The practice of exhibiting is also of interest to Dröge Wendel herself, as she states that there is always a form of conflict involved in an exhibition. Even though exhibiting is the one thing in particular that invites for a connection between people and objects, she also wonders if exhibitions these days can still be more than just snapshots.

The model of *Think Tank*, the main object of her doctorate, is interesting in that sense. It occupies a headspace in between mind and matter, both present and absent as an object at the same time. The architectural model is standing behind her, a darker shade of green than the objects, slightly reminiscent of an egg. Dröge Wendel talks about her decisions decorating the interior and shows footage of a marine film to illustrate how she wants to develop the work. For her, it is more interesting to think about the infinity of possibilities, then to come up with a resolution. It seems that she is much more interested in the state of chaos preceding design, which may be what sets her apart from designers working on similar grounds. The material interest that is presented at the forefront of her work is a means to an end. The material is what allows people to pursue their social interests. She reminds us of what Jeremiah Day said earlier today: the objects in the room are not necessarily the subject matter. Furniture, or interior design, are not the subject so to say; artificial intelligence is. 'Do we want an intelligent house, a house that makes us intelligent, or a house that allows both entities to become intelligent compounds?' she asks.

Dröge Wendel's definition of research is 'answering some of your questions'. It is important for her to ask and answer these questions through the act of sculpting: 'if you do sculpting, you become a different person. It changes everything'. When saying that, she is actually speaking of material resistance, something that you simply do not understand as long as you have never cut sheet metal, softened clay or grated the side of your thumb on grainy sand paper. Material resistance introduces a kinship to the skin of things, bodily or metaphorically, that is sometimes forgotten when we talk about what is artistic research and what is not.

If Dröge Wendel's research method is in the making, the respondents reflecting on her project represent the scientific interest in objects. Reflecting upon her presentation are philosophers Julien Kiverstein and Jonne Hoek. Kiverstein is the first to respond. He speaks about the relational and performative life of things. His response connects to one of the first things Dröge Wendel said, that her work deals with the metaphysical shades of grey – that mind and matter are not opposites but a spectrum within which she is moving. Kiverstein adds to this by saying that the relational life of things is material culture. The performative life of things, on the other hand, is material agency. The material agency he is talking about is a hot topic, both in philosophy and the arts, representing the idea that non-human forms of life should be valued equally to humans in the anthropocene.

Continuing on this hierarchy between things and humans, he introduces the term affordance – the functions ascribed to objects by mankind. Affordances – like climbable stairs, he explains – express the culturing of objects, as we link affordances to objects by convention. A light switch, a handle, a chair. We expect something from these objects instantly, and there is no need for us to explain to each other what that something is; knowledge of affordance already exists between us.

The second respondent, philosopher Jonne Hoek invites for the audience to join him as he sits down comfortably on one of the greyish-green objects. He talks about the relationship between technology and art. Helped by the wonderful comment "I'm intimate with my laptop", he draws a parallel between technological life-aids and vulnerability. Are we using technology to stop being vulnerable? Vulnerability he says, is not necessarily a negative thing. It's also a potential for change and growth. I think of Ann Demeester again, who would agree with Hoek that vulnerability is key for developing oneself. Compared to Jonas Staal (who in a way hides behind charisma), Dröge Wendel really pushes the concept of human vulnerability to a research strategy.

Words like 'work', 'research', 'object', 'subject'; we carry them in our pockets between the theatre, the foyer, the studios and the attic. But each time they appear, they seem changed. Or to speak with the words of Dröge Wendel: 'we all have our own juicy words we like to hear'. But despite preferences in juice, they all have one thing in common: all artists have individually stated one way or another that artistic work should be at the center of the PhD.