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The State of the Arts in the Netherlands

Dutch Diary, Summer 2011

Paul O'Kane

> *. . . there is no reason inherent in the conditions of life on this earth that can make us consider ourselves obliged to do good, to be kind and thoughtful, even to be polite, nor for an atheist artist to consider himself obliged to begin over again a score of times a piece of work the admiration aroused by which will matter little to his worm-eaten body, like the patch of yellow wall painted with so much skill and refinement by the artist destined to be forever unknown and barely identified under the name Vermeer.*
>
> Marcel Proust

As you take the train to Amsterdam from Schiphol airport you may notice that kilometres of graffiti on walls adjoining the tracks have become overgrown with ivy. The sight is new to me and faintly dispiriting in its symbolism. Rumours and news reports emitting from the Netherlands signal an increasingly right-wing shift in a country that is in many ways famed for its tolerant, liberal, radical and progressive society. If there is one art that reveals the urgent necessity of a people to represent itself and be heard it is surely graffiti. It has become a kind of second nature ranging freely over the postmodern city, annoying conservatives but enjoyed by those who perceive it as an unruly futural claim on urban territory. And if there is one sign we could take from Western art's iconology to represent a deathly force of inevitable closure it is surely ivy, a notoriously robust and exuberant weed which brings darkness wherever there once was light and gradually crushes and suffocates whatever it wraps its sticky limbs around.

Though political wheels in Holland have turned in a worrying direction, Amsterdam itself has not been visibly compromised. The city can still claim to be one of the most romantic in Europe. If you are out at dawn you might witness evidence of the city's round-the-clock social life as carefree youngsters dreamily weave their way home on bicycles, smiling to themselves and passersby, one free hand texting to some new friend found amid Amsterdam's exceptionally fluid multiculture.

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Sara van der Heide, *Hollands Kabinet*, 2010, detail, one of 220 watercolours on paper (number as of 20 May 2011) 18 x 26 cm each, courtesy the artist and Galerie Diana Stigter, Amsterdam

Once the day kicks in, the waterborne city swells with tourists agog at the tall, narrow seventeenth-century homes and warehouses, some of which now slouch on their contrived foundations as if made of wax – an uncanny phenomenon likely to increase the paranoia of spaced-out pot-smokers tumbling from the city's intoxicating 'coffee shops'. If you join a sight-seeing boat ride around the city you'll witness global tourists turning, nodding and raising cameras in synch with a digital audio guide matched to the vessel's routine journey. But this obedient audience surges with enthusiasm, almost destabilising the flat-bottomed craft, when Anne Frank's house comes into view. It seems the quaint wonders of the seventeenth century cannot compete with the ghoulish twenty-first century

appetite for trauma tourism. Why does this little story, about a little girl, in a little space, writing a little book reach around the world in such a way that the jaw of a six-year-old child from Southeast Asia drops open at the mention of Anne Frank's name? Perhaps it should give us hope that even those engaged in an uncritical mode of tourism can reveal empathy for those less free and less fortunate than themselves.

At de Appel – an up-to-speed Amsterdam art institute installed in the charming architecture of a disused nineteenth-century school – a contemporary art exhibition titled 'Fluiten in het Donker' ('Whistling in the Dark') reveals the level of political engagement and paranoia currently manifesting itself within Amsterdam's art community. Sara van der Heide, an artist appalled and intimidated by the new right-wing *Kabinet* of leading ministers, has painted one image of an antique Dutch household cabinet every day since the new government first assembled 'and will continue to do so as long as it remains in power'. Her space in the exhibition is filled with row upon row of these rapidly executed representations that constitute an act both of survival and of resistance.

The piece summarises many artists' political predicament: how to retain a carefully nurtured sensibility while resisting antithetically ugly forces that threaten the values for which we strive in life and art. We must fight to protect all we have constructed for ourselves, but we must fight in our own way and on our own terms lest we concede a victory to our opponents by allowing their attack to draw us into *their* world-view, their values and out of our own. Van der Heide shows that some disciplined daily act may be necessary, like scratches on a prison wall or pages of a diary, like the date paintings of the artist On Kawara or the prayers of a hostage. All of these are ways to maintain a personal dignity while giving form and hope to a circumstance one might otherwise regard as intolerable or impossible to represent.

Tania Bruguera is one of several international artists invited to participate in the de Appel show by the mysterious person or persons who sign themselves only as 'The Curator'. For her contribution Bruguera hired a professional security team equipped with intimidating dogs to search the entire building. She thereby used art provocatively, not to reassure us but to show a worst-case scenario, a prediction or warning of what life could become for the arts if right-wing forces go unchecked.

In English, the term 'whistling in the dark' is used in a mocking way to refer to ineffectuality; for instance, to describe someone searching for something without hope of finding it. But in the context of art 'Whistling in The Dark' could signify the courageous relinquishment of control that artists strategically deploy in order to discover the unexpected. The words also take on a sensual and mysterious quality, invoking synaesthesia, wherein sound, light and space become confused.

In their influential book *1,000 Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari begin a chapter on territory by describing a child walking somewhat fearfully in the fading evening light, then intuitively, nervously, beginning to whistle, something like a bird sonically defining a territory. In such circumstances, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, the human 'becomes animal', using a sensual response to danger to deterritorialise logical divisions of sound and space. The child whistling in the dark

Maze de Boer, *Sound on Sound*, 2011, directional microphone, headphones, speakers, Buttkicker (bass subwoofer), cables, courtesy the artist

gives musical form to its fears, making art from a threatening situation while erasing a subjective distinction, otherwise heightened by anxiety, between who they are and where they are, between their figure and their ground.

Upstairs at de Appel the artist Maze de Boer deployed highly sophisticated microphones and a complex speaker apparatus that allow those inside de Appel to overhear, Stasi-style, conversations of people passing across the street from the gallery. Meanwhile Pierre Bismuth made and sent anonymous messages with unnerving implications to residents of buildings in the immediate vicinity of the gallery. The letters were made by assembling letters cut from newspapers in the style once favoured by extortionists (and celebrated in Jamie Reid's designs for The Sex Pistols.) Bismuth's letters simply spelled out 'I DoN't KnoW YOu', an innocent statement of fact, but one that, delivered in this way, questioned

comfortable conceits of community and set up a frisson of social tension in the gallery's locale.

Visiting de Appel I learned at first hand about the impending savage cuts to Holland's arts budget imposed by the unpopular Kabinet. Incidentally, the Kabinet is also (according to the Curator's statement) 'setting the agenda for a new national history'. The cuts to the arts threaten to curtail and/or close many of the Netherlands' leading institutions, including even the Rijksakademie and Jan van Eyck Academie, envied the world over as notable centres of excellence in arts education. De Appel assistants wore bright yellow T-Shirts with the words '1 voor cultuur' (1 for culture) in black and red, and were preparing for a march to protest at The Hague. Their slogan insisted that *all* the arts and artists must now set aside 1990s-style individualism and urgently unite in protecting the arts. Bureaucrats and bankers may now think the arts are something society can take or leave, but artists know best how the arts exert their own quiet power in the world, providing something essential to the functioning of a dynamic, cohesive, liberal and tolerant society.

A few days later I found myself inside the gloom of the Anne Frank House Museum along with other tourists who had all queued in a sudden heat-wave. We were here to witness the curated tragedy of a group of disempowered people gripping the last threads of freedom amid an onslaught of ideological terror. The curator's duty to protect fragile documentary fragments while making them visible to inquisitive hordes can make history appear contrived and smothered by the weight of its protectors. But occasionally something potent stares out through the curatorial veils and pricks the emotions. This is why we have come, to be stirred out of our consumerist complacency by traces of a tragic time regained.

Yellowed pictures, cut from 1940s magazines and pasted onto walls by the inhabitants, might have given the incarcerated families some sense of space, providing a simulacral horizon for a home that was also a prison – albeit keeping a more lethal prison at bay. This slightly bohemian act of domestic collage is something adults might have done only for children in such extreme circumstances. On another wall the children's names and changing heights are marked in pencilled lines and this moving sign, measuring and treasuring passing time, conflates growing with hope and provides another way of maintaining the future as a space of possibility. Near a ladder leading to the attic the curators have placed an emotive anecdote. The words are Anne Frank's, describing in her diary how, once a month, she could visit the attic and there, without fear of being seen, glimpse through a thin gap between roof and wall a slice of sunlight, a tiny taste of freedom, the beauty of the sky and changing seasons. Thus, in the cramped spaces of the Anne Frank House Museum, where in the 1940s all but a thin glimmer of hope was lost, life continued. Despite their cramped, desperate conditions people measured and treasured whatever growth and hope they were able to discern. They did what they could to keep open some sense of possibility, some horizon, some hope of a way. They used words and pictures to create the illusion of opening up the walls that incarcerated them, they found ways and means – surreptitious if necessary – to look beyond a ceiling that seemed to get lower every day.

From the museum I toil in heat to meet Özkan Gölpinar at the stylish canal-side offices of his organisation the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture or Fonds BKVB. Here I find confirmation of the gloomy message that he first reported to the 2011 'Cultural Diversity' conference in London organised by *Third Text* and Arts Council England.[1] Today, his words are haunted by dejection, laced with anger and disbelief. Gölpinar is a man with a chimera on his back, the same chimera bearing down on many progressive and liberal art professionals in Europe and the wider world.

As part of the Fonds, Özkan proudly managed a programme called 'Art Beyond Borders', which has actively and imaginatively increased awareness of cultural diversity in the Netherlands by promoting the work of appropriate artists, writers and curators. Now the Fonds is being suddenly and savagely cut by the new Kabinet as well as being conflated with Mondriaan, another, slightly incongruous, arts organisation. Budgets have shrunk, spaces and offices too, but most importantly the legitimisation, support and appreciation, the very context for what Özkan and his programme have done so well has all but gone. This is what a thoroughgoing ideological switch feels like and it is frightening.

The cuts have made the Fonds feel unwanted and unwelcome. The swing to a more right-wing power makes the previously celebrated and exemplary Fonds appear barely tolerated, like an anachronistic hangover from an era of abundance in which multiculturalism was actively promoted and encouraged. Thus the Right implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, perceives tolerance, understanding and equality to be a luxury rather than something fundamental to *any* society, rich or poor. The director of the Fonds recently left to become the director of one of the leading art academies in the Netherlands, but that is now also under threat of severe cutbacks. Hence there is, it seems, nowhere to run or hide from this relentless right-wing vision creeping over and threatening to suffocate the thriving arts of the Netherlands. And in the meantime, the newly appointed director of the two awkwardly combined organisations (Mondriaan and BKVB) has also decided to leave. At this point the fund is looking for a new director who wants to take up the difficult task of merging the two organisations.

One of the glories of the recent financial and cultural boom years has been the relative autonomy and trust awarded to specialists like Özkan simply to get on with an important job using their local, sometimes esoteric, skills and knowledge. Now, according to the paradoxical logic for which the Right is famed, philistine bureaucrats are moving into the arts, closing down all they can, arguing for 'small government' while wielding their axes clumsily, carelessly and hurriedly imposing their own less informed agenda.

When the diversity of our world and our society are simplistically homogenised as purely economic problems or numerical units, accountants and fiscal thinkers replace local specialists and incongruously ascend to positions of power and influence. Today accountants and technocrats seem to be having the last word on everything from healthcare to cultural diversity in the arts, often aiming an unwavering 'common sense' at things that are far from common and that do not necessarily aspire to make sense. The great challenge for the arts and for the left is to organise and articulate a compelling and convincing rationale for a *qualitative* response to this quantitative tsunami. The artists and artworks described here might hopefully provide some useful models.

1. The conference, 'The Creative Case for Diversity in Britain', was held at City University, London, on 23 March 2011. This conference was a public platform to debate the publication of *Beyond Cultural Diversity: A Third Text Report*, compiled and edited by Richard Appignanesi, Third Text Publications, London, 2010. Another symposium, on 'The Creative Case for Diversity', sponsored by Arts Council England, was held in Manchester, 12 September 2011, and linked to a week of events organised by decibel Performing Arts Showcase. For more online information about the ongoing Creative Case project, consult: http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/What_is_the_Creative_Case_for_Diversity.pdf

Christodoulos Panayiotou, *2008*, 2008, shredded money, 600 cm diameter x 240 cm height, courtesy the artist and Rodeo Gallery, Istanbul

Another day into my Dutch diary and I cross the mighty Erasmus Bridge that heroically spans Rotterdam's wide waterfront. Commercial shipping passes far beneath and in the distance, beyond the recently regenerated docksides, working cranes punctuate the horizon. It is refreshing after Amsterdam's compressed, sometimes cute historic tourism to encounter wide-open spaces and living industry. During the Second World War much of Rotterdam was obliterated by the Luftwaffe so that only on its fringes can you find old, elegant and desirable homes. The obliterated centre became a postwar playground for architectural experiment and an unusual degree of one-upmanship has taken place, leaving a catalogue of eye-catching, provocative and absurd constructions.

At the city's Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art I find a group show titled – somehow unsurprisingly – 'The End of Money' in which an impressive array of artists has been convened by the curator, Juan A Gaitán (assisted by Amira Gad). The first piece I encounter is *2008* by Christodoulos Panayiotou. It is a huge pile of shredded banknotes containing all the currency that the Cypriot Central Bank recalled as it initiated a shift to the Euro during that year. This piece may be the most literal response to the title in the show but remains one of the most memorable and enduring. It offers its towering, conical shape as a kind of Arte Povera and requires us

to value not only a political narrative but colours, textures and forms that the cash has acquired in the process of translation. Perhaps here we might say that quantities have become qualities.

Today, as we watch what might indeed be 'The End of Money' unfolding, economists around the world compare calculations, each coming to a different solution or prediction based on abstract quantitative logic. And we cannot help starting to believe – as people perhaps did in order to endure and survive the 1930s and 1940s – that it is *qualities* we must attend to. Qualities happen to be the artist's remit and territory. Qualities, not quantities, are what the artist has a responsibility to promote and present in order to contribute to the solution of sharing this finite world. Seeing a show as inventive and exquisitely staged as 'The End of Money' might compel us to wonder if now, as in the 1930s, financial panics and disasters are caused not so much by lack of money or caution as by a lack of care and imagination on the part of governments and economists driven along the narrowing rails of some limited options. Crisis is surely the moment to call upon reserves of imaginative and creative thinking, and where better to find this than in the arts, where arcane expertise is so passionately nurtured.

For what other reason – aside from the merely decorative – would governments, banks and media corporations fund the arts in boom times if not to call upon them for a return on their investment in times of financial failure? But sadly money is being crudely withdrawn from the arts as if they had been nothing but a bauble for merchants, something regarded as of merely symbolic value, providing unwarranted kudos by association. Thus our best resources of inventive thought are savaged just when they are most urgently required, despite all the lingo learned and talk talked over canapés and proseccos in the golden years of the corporate-sponsored private view.

Another day, another Dutch town; this time Delft, where you can witness great churches stripped white by seventeenth-century Protestant iconoclasts and follow a series of clearly marked locations of relevance to the life of the gracious master Vermeer. One location is the precise spot from which Vermeer painted his famous *View of Delft*. Much of the architecture composing the original scene is lost, but you can align yourself and your digital camera with his seventeenth-century eye and feel the distant past fit convincingly into the present. When I visited, dusty roadworks were in progress around that famous little harbour, and the brick bridge that formed the centrepiece of Vermeer's composition was being noisily replaced by a sleek concrete span capable of handling a few more decades of cars, trucks and tourist buses.

Living in the society from which modern capitalism seems to have been born, Vermeer was a proto-bourgeois, head of the local artists' guild, keeper of a good house with servants and respectable company as well as being an unrivalled craftsman in his particularly slow and meticulous approach to painting. A famous passage in Marcel Proust – given as the epigraph at the head of this article – wherein the writer Bergotte, moments before dying, meditates on the purpose of art by contemplating a patch of light in Vermeer's *View*, survives as an enduring endorsement of art's mysterious value and should always be to hand when the arts need defending against the rationale of philistines.

A short train ride away at the Mauritshuis in The Hague you can see Vermeer's *View* and map it onto both Proust's words and your earlier encounter with the actual place. Three hundred years after its creation *View of Delft* retains its ability to beguile even appraisers like myself who, brought up in a modernist and postmodernist paradigm, influenced by critical theory and a social history of art, might still have our heart melted by Vermeer's masterly manipulation of oily pigment. Here he produced effects of light and space as an accurate record of an environment, of an atmosphere and of a culture, but also framed and executed them in a significant display of human empathy and dexterity that mysteriously allows the act to transcend its materiality.

Turn around (according to the current Mauritshuis hang) and you come face-to-face with Vermeer's *Girl With A Pearl Earring*, now the subject not only of a best-selling novella by Tracy Chevalier but also of

Patricia Kaersenhout, *Girl with a Pearl*, 2007, photomanipulation, 20.69 cm x 25.12cm, courtesy the artist

a baleful Hollywood movie starring Scarlett Johansson. This iconic painting has also been expropriated in the work of contemporary artist Patricia Kaersenhout, an artist supported by Özkan Gölpinar's Fonds BKVB. Kaersenhout is a Dutch artist with Surinamese roots that signal Holland's historical appetite for enrichment through slave trading and colonial suppression. Kaersenhout has carefully constructed an image in which features of an 'Ebony' magazine advertisement model replace those of the famous servant girl in the blue headband, and this relatively modest pastiche seems far more valuable than the one made in Peter Webber's movie, despite millions of dollars lavished upon its elaborate reconstructions.

As already suggested, Protestant seventeenth-century Holland may well have been the birthplace of modern capitalism. Its small commodified paintings, often showing moral lessons and banal scenes of daily life, are a far cry from the grand baroque art favoured by the Catholic powers with whom the Netherlands long battled for independence, which seems to treat worldly economics with disdain, promising an infinitely richer afterlife somewhere within its unearthly swirls.

Protestant pragmatism and austerity are something we have come to associate with the philosophy of the US and with the merchant class who would occupy the centre of modern society from the eighteenth-century French revolution on. But the original Protestant ethos conspired with Holland's unrivalled seafaring technology, trading expertise and diplomatic nous to produce an abundant culture which historian Simon Schama described as 'embarrassed' by its riches. Vermeer's famous pearl, like the Turkish rugs, tulips, Venetian glass, South American silver, Canadian beaver hats and Chinese ceramics that all feature in paintings of the period, is one tiny element of a rich visual code, a system of signs and scenarios utilised by artists and viewers to guide moral behaviour and values though a turbulent period of unprecedented social change. In seventeenth-century Holland, so-called 'genre paintings' operated a little like today's TV dramas or soap operas, while the still lifes and portraits also tell us much – and rather self-consciously – about the society in which they appeared. Dutch art of the seventeenth century tells us much about the origins of our moral economy. We might be tempted to refer to it as 'qualitative accounting' as it shows the artist well placed to determine and debate the values circulating within society.

Today, millions and billions flash before our media-fixated eyes, won and lost on exchanges, spent as bonuses for bankers or playthings for oligarchs. Then trillions are bandied about and we feel even more helpless and disoriented. Our representative apparatus may fail us once economics dissipates in a sea of abstractions – none of which means much to laymen used to dealing in tens and hundreds – but this reveals another reason and meaning for the arts. Most of our lives depend on relatively small, readily comprehensible sums, but when these are threatened, and when our ethics and values are affronted, we feel the urge to defend ourselves, to protest or contribute constructively to tackling the cause of the problem. The arts provide a way for us to make our own picture of our own reality, challenging and changing existing values and comparing our vision with the dominant perspective. The arts are a way to give shape to the incomprehensible and fearful, to communicate and compare human experience in search of a shared consensus, a way to promote more hopeful means of understanding and resolving our predicament.

Holland, a nation built of wind and water, may indeed have given birth to the unrestrained trade which Protestant capitalism places at the heart and the pinnacle of society and its values. Though the Netherlands were much admired for their trading prowess during the so-called 'Golden Age', part of this historical legacy is a tendency to reform everything to satisfy the god of business and remake the diverse world in its image. The importance of business is inflated until it is greater than art or religion, greater even than health and education. Business is seen as the key to every problem, the be-all and end-all of society. Yet today there is a pervasive sense of the failure or endgame of this model, the end perhaps of capitalism itself. It is as if we are witnessing the last gasps of an economic model that profits without sufficiently acknowledging other values and institutions, with a natural inclination to exploit without reinvesting in the society from which it draws its wealth, failing to balance wealth accumulated against care and support distributed in return.

As established systems of authority descend into bickering ineffectuality, art and artists remind us that it is the people themselves who are the ultimate power, rulers of any democracy that bears their name. It is the people's needs and wishes that are mediated and manipulated by powerful institutions, it is the people who employ and tolerate the powerful, not the other way around. Despite worldwide ructions of myriad numbers on digital screens in multiple monetary exchanges linked by instantaneous communications, more basic and direct forms of life go on.

The artist today represents an imaginative and alternative response by resisting a myopic and homogeneous vision, by changing pace and turning heads in order to avert the disaster of a lemming-like fatal rush. Art and artists, with their qualitative feel for the world and its materials, can remind us that our lives are ultimately in *our* hands not those of banks and governments. If banks and governments fail we must be able to survive. The arts can show an otherwise passive consumerism that we have a right to speak and an ability to make, to picture, to conjure a vision or suggest a form, even to promote our own ideas of economy.

For my last days in Holland I returned to Amsterdam. There, a group of artist-activists were concluding an ambitious project working with vacant retail spaces on the top floor of Magna Plaza – a huge retail complex in the city centre. The project was one manifestation of a nomadic enterprise known as the Eddie the Eagle Museum convened by artist Aukje Dekker along with directors Arthur van Beek and Sieto Noordhoorn. It provided a way for artists to come together, discuss and represent what was happening to the arts in Holland and suggest some alternatives or solutions. One of these was 'Post Shopping' (echoing 'The End of Money') in which buying commodities was replaced by exchanging experiences.

I arrived while a closing celebration was in progress, the atmosphere like the exuberant end of a successful conference or summer school. A three-course meal, priced at a few euros, was prepared for more than a hundred artists and guests and accompanied by live music. The talks had concluded that, in the absence of government funding for the arts, artists must not only protest but combine energies to raise their own funds. One plan enthusiastically agreed upon was to start an artist's brewery, or at least launch a brand of beer. This would be named

Tijdelijke Samenscholing, *Halbe Liter Commercial*, 30 June 2011, performance at the *Eddie the Eagle Museum* convened by artist Aukje Dekker along with directors Arthur van Beek and Sieto Noordhoorn at Magna Plaza, Amsterdam, photo: Dim Balsen

Halbe after the minister primarily responsible for cuts to the arts (the word coincidentally also refers to a small beer). Through the boom years, beer companies had often sponsored the arts, adding their name to highly visible events, but without investing much in infrastructure to help on rainy days like these. Now the artists themselves will take up this model and use it more responsibly, making themselves less dependent on fickle marketing exercises.

At a break between courses everyone sharing the feast was ushered to one end of the top-floor complex where shops which at other times might have done a roaring trade had become a strange set on which performance group Tijdelijke Samenscholing staged *Halbe Liter Commercial*. This was a half-hour show which both advertised Halbe beer and satirised beer advertising. The artists, dressed as cowgirls and cowboys – one as a sad-looking native American Indian – sang and danced in carefully choreographed and composed Wild West style, defiantly launching their own commodity as the means by which to survive the coming cultural drought. For a generation artists have used simulation and pastiche to echo or mirror rather than antagonistically confront the forces to which they

are opposed, but here there was a sharp new edge to the strategy. It was like being present at a piece of authentic inter-war Dada, now polished up to suit our own era which, though shining ever more spectacularly, seems no less threatened by various manifestations of fascist thinking.

Leaving Holland, I forgot to look again at the ivy gradually covering the graffiti by the train tracks, but no doubt it has grown a few centimetres longer, thicker, darker and deeper. Back in London, while gathering my thoughts and impressions of Holland, I toured the Saatchi gallery's new sculpture show 'The Shape of Things to Come' and found one of the stars there to be Dutch artist Folkert de Jong. His mesmerising work *The Dance* mixes graceful and dynamic figuration with crude surfaces and harsh materials. The whole tells a tale that complements the stories told here and helps bring us to a conclusion.

De Jong's figures wear seventeenth-century Dutch costume, representing people drawn from the political and economic events that defined the birth and development of early capitalism in and around seventeenth-century Holland. His work also refers to a famous monument in New York City – the so-called Peter de Minuit Exchange – that marks the insulting exchange of beads and baubles with which native American Indians were tricked to part company with the island of Manhattan – now perhaps the richest real estate on the planet. Near to the historical scene of this crime, the erection of a wall started wars between the Dutch and the English and became 'Wall Street' some time before Dutch New Amsterdam morphed into English New York.

Folkert de Jong, *The Dance*, 2008, styrofoam, pigmented polyurethane foam, artificial gemstones, overall installation 190 x 400 x 300 cm, image courtesy the Saatchi Gallery, London

Seventeenth-century Holland faced its own early form of capitalist crisis when an unsustainable economic bubble, built around speculations on imported tulips, burst and left many distraught and ruined. De Jong's work refers to all this history and implies that the 'dance' of capitalism has never ceased. The traders' clothes and shoes may have changed over the centuries but their callous, cynical and irresponsible behaviour remains the same.

De Jong's work also illustrates once again that we are perhaps wiser to trust in the artist than the politician or economist to find out the real deal of our life and times. His work talks to us obliquely but without deception, through well-wrought and sometimes wildly manipulated paint and Styrofoam, a material chosen for both its lightness and malleability but sometimes left exposed as a sign of banal consumerism. Through articulate forms and gestures de Jong's work speaks to us in a language that we find we can and do understand. His grotesque forms, and the evidence left in his sculptures of what a post-holocaust theorist of mass-production like Jean Baudrillard might interpret as the 'evil banality' of their ubiquitous, bar-coded base material, all hint at the seriousness of our situation now, in and as history. Meanwhile, the exuberance of his idiosyncratic craft encourages us to find our own solution, an artist's solution, a solution to a failing system in which the legitimacy, capability and power of the 'powers that be' is newly in doubt.