

25.07 – 27.09.2015

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF REALITY

Marga Weimans
Mette Sterne

I

A WEB OF HISTORIES

Participating in the street parade of the Rotterdam Summer Carnival involves entering a space which is, so to speak, not 'neutral', no more than the white cube of a museum would be. The fact that the Summer Carnival was organized for the first time in the 1980s by a number of citizens from Rotterdam with Afro-Caribbean roots, can be traced back to the history of European colonization and its aftermath. The Europeans introduced a catholic carnival to the colonies in Central and Latin America, where it eventually became a mixed form of carnival, due to the African culture that was brought along by the slaves. This fusion of European, African and native cultures is reflected by the various forms of masquerades, but also in the sorts of

music played, such as samba and calypso. In the late fifties of the past century, many communities migrated from the former colonial areas to Europe - to large cities such as Paris, London and Berlin - and thus forms of carnival from the Caribbean Diaspora appeared in North America and Europe. The Rotterdam Summer Carnival, one of the largest carnivals in Europe, is an example of this intertwining of the migration history, the colonial history and the cultural history. Participating in this carnival as a Rotterdam visual art establishment, an institution that is historically based on western values, requires a different form of rhetoric than if we were to take part in a stand-alone street parade or procession.

II

INSIDER EN OUTSIDER

What does it mean to TENT to go outside and define its place within the standards and context of the street parade of the Summer Carnival? During the streetparade of the Summer Carnival, TENT will be a guest with an own costumed procession, and will temporarily become the 'other'. Thus, connection can be created between various spaces, events and procedures, with an open attitude towards society and art and culture in the broadest sense. During the street parade we will act within the codes of the Summer Carnival, which are partly formally determined. There is, for instance, a fixed route, the maximum speed of the procession is 1.2 km/h and a costumed procession consists of a minimum of 45 participants. These codes are

also related to the audience; the audience has to be convinced within other terms than those of an art institution. Whereas observing art in a museum is usually a rather static and cautious activity — not free from the hierarchy of so-called good taste — carnival is, quite the contrary, about the affective aspect, the physical, the frenzied aspect. Literally, the audience is mobilized, is invited to surrender to the impulse to dance, to roar with the others, or, if only for a short moment, to click their fingers. To make a dialogue possible, it is necessary to manoeuvre at the crossroads of art and carnival, of so-called black and white culture, and from the position of both the insider and the outsider.

III AN ARTISTIC, BUT ABOVE ALL POLITICAL MATTER

Fashion designer Marga Weimans works on the interface of cultures, in the European dimension of the African Diaspora. Her artistic hand is coloured by her own complex black identity. Having Surinam roots and having grown up in a white district in Rotterdam, she doesn't regard herself as white or black, but as both. In her concept for the costumed procession, she plays with ideas about urbanism, everyday life, the normative framework and how to get out of these. Her work is about transformation, breaking out from the city, the institution, getting away from the current norms. For her, working in the context of the Summer Carnival is also some sort of transformation: from haute couture to carnival, from the catwalk to the street. The procession

starts with a geometrical abstraction: head-dresses form an architectonic landscape with references to the urban grid and hardworking city dwellers. Via an industrial installation, with shapes that have been inspired by traditional African looms, in combination with a modernistic visual language, the web of the city is transformed into grotesque forms of entropic, organic, and capriciously formed splendour ornaments. Weimans portrays the carnival as a production process, as the production of a new or other reality where everyone in principle has control over the creative process. Seen in this light, participating in the Summer Carnival proves to be a rather serious matter after all. An artistic, but above all political matter.

IV

CLASH AS A PRODUCTIVE MOMENT

More than any other notion, art is capable of producing 'radical experiences', with which knowledge can be acquired as a sort of radical empiricism, as described by the American philosopher William James. All experiences have value and meaning, and deserve a place in our explanations. It is therefore of major importance to pay equal attention to the experience of all art forms, including the forms that are classified as 'low' or 'popular' culture, such as the carnival. Deeming the one experience as more 'true' or 'refined' than the other, obstructs the shaping of new ideas and other meanings. Subsequently, it is important to interpret this experience once again, in an

institutional context, to deepen what might initially have seemed superficial. TENT's costumed procession will probably have an unsettling effect on the Summer Carnival. The music and aesthetics will sometimes deviate from those of the traditional Summer Carnival. On the other hand, taking part in the Summer Carnival, amid a chaos of hundreds of thousands of visitors, might be a rather extreme experience for us too. Although it might be extreme, it is important to recognize that this experience is packed with significance, assuming that this difference, or this 'clash' if you like, might actually be a very productive moment.

V

A CARNIVALESQUE WORLD VIEW

With a carnivalesque view of the world, there is room for free expression, existing power structures are turned inside out in a light-hearted and theatrical manner, and jokes can take the form of a festive criticism, as the Russian literary scholar Michail Bakhtin wrote as early as at the beginning of the 20th century. During carnival, eccentric behaviour is allowed, and the differences between classes and ranks, between high and low, are (temporarily) dissolved. Outdated ideas are banished, which paves the way for imagining another reality. Obviously, this also provides a paradox: the party always takes place within the framework (crush barriers) of the establishment. But what could be more

fun than transforming yourself temporarily with a mask or costume, and going out on the street as a piece of fruit, your favourite philosopher or kitchenware? On The Other Side Of Reality is more than carnival as a transitory performance: it is a plea for a bit more carnival in everyday life. Not in the sense of a continuous collective hangover, but rather as a positive attitude towards the fluidity of identities and the relationship between human beings and objects. Wearing a mask, it is possible to observe a reality in which extremes appear to be the opposite ends of the same line, and where the artist can lead the way in the avant-garde of imagination, being the leader of the carnival.

Carnival and visual art: it is not the first time that these two merge. Both in exhibitions and in the theoretical discourse, subjects such as carnival, the carnivalesque world and masked procession, are dealt with frequently. In the past few years alone, a number of exhibitions were held in the Netherlands, in which the carnival formed centre stage, such as at the Appel Arts Centre in Amsterdam, KOP in Breda and Marres in Maastricht. Themes such as the mask, popular rituals, humour and the 'wild' or 'primitive', play a part in the works of renowned artists, such as the creations of Mike Kelley and the self-portraits of the New York artist Jaimie Warren. In addition, the street parade has been explored as an art form by for instance Rory Pilgrim and Jimmy Durham. On *The Other Side Of Reality* is not a manifestation about the carnival or the carnivalesque aspect of art, but a manifestation with the carnival. This summer, TENT is seeking connection with one of the largest celebrations of cultural diversity in Europe: the street parade of the Rotterdam Summer Carnival. As a research into an inclusive way of creating and showing art, in which African and European ways of experiencing and appreciating art, come together.

After the Summer Carnival, Marga Weimans' costumed procession, entitled *Carnival Carnavalesque (Trade)*, will be

transformed into TENT's exhibition room, where objects, costumes, image and sound of the parade will together form a total-installation. With her installation *The End of Normal*, the Rotterdam performance artist Mette Sterre will fit in with the work of Weimans. During the summer, she will be working together with Rotterdam youngsters to organize a street parade.

On the one hand, we are seeking the artistic quality of the carnival and are showing the connection between contemporary developments in performance art and the street. We join in with a participation model, which does not need to be invented because it already exists, and which brings audience and performers into the same arena. On the other hand, we investigate in what way the carnival could be some form of public social criticism. Contemporary carnival is not an obsolete tradition; it is still very much alive and still full of cheerful comments on (supposed) abuses. An art institution can create room to joke about this and nevertheless gain insight and understanding. Scope for production and reception, in which ideas about thinking, observing, imagining and being are tested in relation to our ideas, and vice versa. Because, wouldn't you agree, that if the art space cannot be a place where a diversity of constellations is allowed to crystallize, why should it continue to exist?