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Amanda Wasielewski

From City Space to Cyberspace

Art, Squatting, and Internet Culture in the Netherlands

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*Art, Squatting, and Internet Culture
in the Netherlands*

Amanda Wasielewski

Amsterdam University Press



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Introduction

The narrative of the birth of internet culture often focuses on the achievements of American entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley, but there is an alternative history of European internet pioneers who developed their own model of network culture in the early 1990s. Drawing from their experiences in the leftist and anarchist movements of the '80s, they built do-it-yourself (DIY) networks that give us a glimpse into what network culture could have been if it were in the hands of squatters, hackers, punks, artists, and activists. In the Dutch scene the early internet was intimately tied to the aesthetics and politics of squatting. Untethered from profit motives, these artists and activists aimed to create a decentralized tool that would democratize culture and promote open and free exchange of information.

The first publicly accessible Dutch internet service providers—XS4ALL and De Digitale Stad (The Digital City)—were developed in 1993. Hack-tic, the group of anarchist hackers who facilitated the projects, expressed their idealism by naming their service XS4ALL (“access for all”), and, working together with artists and cultural producers, they created the groundbreaking public internet portal De Digitale Stad (launched January 1994). The aim of this book is to construct a pre-history of internet art and theory in the Netherlands leading up until this groundbreaking moment. It explores what happened in the 1980s that allowed an alternative model of the internet to develop, looking at both traditionally-defined artistic practices and political/spatial practices over the course of the decade.

There is an artistic strategy—or de Certeauian “tactic”—that unites practices as disparate as urban squatting, painting, television, and exhibition/event curation. Rather than a medium born when the first web browsers were developed in the early '90s, this book argues that the practices which have subsequently been labelled “internet art”,¹ particularly European browser-based work, were part of a longer aesthetic development that began

All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

¹ See Tilman Baumgärtel, *Net.art: Materialien zur Netzkunst* (Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 1999); Tilman Baumgärtel, *Net.art 2.0: New Materials Towards Net Art* (Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2001); Rachel Greene, *Internet Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004); Josephine Bosma, *Nettitudes: Let's Talk Net Art* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2011).

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before the World Wide Web was invented. The constellation of practices profiled in the following pages are anchored theoretically to the concept of *kraken* (“squatting” in Dutch), which has the same roots as the English verb “to crack” and is literally translated as “to crack open.”²

Linguistically speaking, squatting is a more active gesture in Dutch: the act of breaking open as well as occupying. The idea is that the tactic of “cracking open,” developed successfully in urban space, could also be used as a technique in media and art to crack open a new space within the established order and create what Hakim Bey has termed “temporary autonomous zones.”³ The fact that the word *kraken* is also deployed in the context of computer hacking, like the English words crack and hack, speaks to the elasticity of *kraken* as a practice. The DIY forms that are created through the use of this tactic are temporary platforms, spaces of autonomy wedged within the cracks of existing infrastructures rather than outside of them. The internet platforms that were created in the early ’90s in the Netherlands were therefore the manifestation of a constellation of practices that arose before the internet was invented.

2 Eric Duivenvoorden, *Een voet tussen de deur: geschiedenis van de kraakbeweging (1964-1999)* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2000), pp. 24, 28. The earlier Dutch term for squatting was *clandestien bezetten* (clandestine occupation). The verb *kraken* is borrowed from the coded slang of traveling people and thieves, which is called *Bargoens* or *dieventaal*. The term *kraker* (squatter) came into use in 1969 in conjunction with the emerging activism around squatting. The term *huispiraat* (house pirate) was also proposed but not taken up.

3 Hakim Bey, *TAZ.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2003). Hakim Bey is a controversial figure in leftwing anarchism whose thinking evolved from LSD and occult-fueled countercultural spheres in the late 1960s to hardline anarchism in the 1980s. Much of his writing has a poetic, speculative and eclectic tone and, so, is neither empirically nor argumentatively constructed and should not be treated as standard academic theory or philosophy. He borrows liberally (and fetishistically) from a variety of non-western cultures and traditions. His most controversial writings contain arguments for pedophilia via anarchist thought. As Bey’s concepts frame a significant portion of this book, primarily the “temporary autonomous zone,” I would like to clarify the reasons for my use of his writing in this context. My reasons are twofold: firstly, that it is an expression of ’80s anarchist thought *from the time period* under discussion and thus encapsulates many of the concerns that fringe leftwing/anarchist thinkers had at the time, and, secondly, that, although it has its faults and inconsistencies, it is nevertheless a useful starting point and apt theoretical model for thinking about radical urban spatial practice and art in Amsterdam during the ’80s. The idea of the temporary autonomous zone represents an alternative method of resistance and a counterpoint to the (futile, as Bey says) leftwing revolutionary goals for permanent change or totalizing political reversal. It allows for micro-revolts *within* the fabric of the hegemonic order rather than from an untenable *outside*. Even so, I would like to clearly state, as the extensive use of this material might be misconstrued as a form of endorsement, that citing Bey’s or any other theorists’ work does not constitute personal support for any of their views.

The choice to focus on the Netherlands, rather than the histories of squatting and media art in other European countries, grew out of the observation that there is a special confluence between urban spatial practice and media practice there, which was supported by the legal and social structures in place in the country. Indeed, the Dutch landscape has been molded by human intervention for centuries. Life in the swampy lowlands has long been a do-it-yourself endeavor. As Hub Zwart writes:

The reclamation, by means of dikes and ditches, of formerly remote, impassable, soggy and swampy areas, where the imprint of human presence had been absent or slight, irrevocably altered the physical appearance of the Netherlands. The landscape was thoroughly humanised. [...] a geometrisation of the landscape took place at an increasing pace and the natural matrix was increasingly fragmented until only a few marginal leftovers remained. Gradually, through diligent manual labour by generations of anonymous farmers, a diffuse, ambiguous, soggy and brackish landscape, in which clear boundaries between land and water (as well as between fresh and saline water) were absent, was replaced by a discrete, highly compartmentalised landscape. For indeed, whereas vague and gradual transitions are characteristic of natural landscapes, human influences tend to produce abrupt boundaries.⁴

These abrupt boundaries are a distinguishing feature of the modern built environment from the nation-state down to the city itself.

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre describes this phenomenon using different terms. He designates this as a transition from “absolute space” to “abstract space” and explicitly ties absolute space to nature. In his conception, the dissolution of absolute space as well as the “cryptic” space of the medieval period begins in the sixteenth century when the “town overtook the country.”⁵ Despite the suspect periodization and primitivist perspective found in Lefebvre’s text, the changes in how boundaries have been defined historically supports his argument. Describing abstract space, Lefebvre writes:

Internal and invisible boundaries began to divide a space that nevertheless remained in thrall to a global strategy and a single power. These

4 Hub Zwart, “Aquaphobia, Tulipmania, Biophilia: A Moral Geography of the Dutch Landscape,” *Environmental Values* 12, no. 1 (2003): p. 110.

5 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 267–9.



boundaries did not merely separate levels—local, regional, national and worldwide. They also separated zones where people were supposed to reduce to their “simplest expression,” to their “lowest common denominator” [...] As a matter of fact “boundaries” is too weak a word here, and it obscures the essential point; it would be more accurate to speak of fracture lines.⁶

The abstract nature of these boundaries, paradoxically, creates a rigidity in the landscape of human geography. This rigidity— as much as it might be virtual or invisible—means that gray zones are increasingly hard to find. In order to subvert established boundaries, activists in the Netherlands needed to create their own “fracture lines” or cracks in the fabric of abstract space.

Addressing this quandary, Hakim Bey (né Peter Lamborn Wilson) theorized the temporary autonomous zone (TAZ) as a means by which radical anarchists might circumvent the rigidity of contemporary political structures. He defines the TAZ as a temporary free anarchist enclave within the totalizing matrix of the built environment. Bey despairs at the Left’s continued struggle for revolution, which he defines as permanent change (or, in his words, change that has “duration”). He writes, “What of the anarchist dream, the Stateless state, the Commune, the autonomous zone with duration, a free society, a free culture? [...] I have not given up hope or even expectation of change—but I distrust the word *Revolution*.”⁷ The TAZ, then, fills this void left by a seemingly unachievable permanent revolution in that it allows for change from within via acute actions and temporary sites of difference and freedom.

Referencing Jean Baudrillard’s theory of “simulation,” in which Baudrillard proposes that late capitalism is characterized by the irrelevance of originality as the “simulacrum,” or copy, precedes the absent original, Bey writes:

Because the State is concerned primarily with Simulation rather than substance, the TAZ can “occupy” these areas clandestinely and carry on its festal purposes for quite a while in relative peace. [...] In sum, realism demands not only that we give up *waiting* for “the Revolution” but also that we give up *wanting* it.⁸

6 Ibid., pp. 316–7.

7 Bey, *TAZ*, p. 98.

8 Bey, *TAZ*, p. 99; Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).



This release from dreaming of or desiring permanent revolution has a corollary in the punk movement's slogan "no future," which expresses not only the pessimism of the era or a lack of political idealism but also a feeling of liberation from the constant, futile struggle of revolution. "No future" resonates with the postmodern moment, signaling not an end but an endless present. Revolution demands a vision of the future and, in the late '70s and '80s in Europe, youth movements increasingly focused on in-the-moment rebellion and deviance rather than forward-looking idealism.

In a revolution-free, endless present, there is no "outside" that will replace society. Instead, there are only ruptures, fissures, and cracks that disrupt its stability. What Bey is describing, then, in his conception of the TAZ are "cracks" formed within the established order or dominant systems of control. A crack cannot exist apart from the substance it cracks into and is thus a negative space, carving out its form and creating a void. At the same time, however, it is a space of creation; it creates something new on the surface and also opens up space within a smooth and continuous field.

Looking at squatting in Amsterdam with this model in mind, it is evident that squatters in the late '70s and '80s effectively established TAZs—or cracks—in the city structure that pushed for radical change from within. These fissures in the fabric of the city space open up new boundaries *within* the city rather than apart from it, which were porous and destabilizing to the system as a whole in part due to their internally autonomous manifestation. In light of the instability they cause, they had to either be temporary—as one is closed, another might spring open somewhere else—or, in the most extreme cases, precipitate total destruction. Cracks are agents of chaos, on one hand, but also catalysts for reparation, regeneration, renewal, change, or reconstruction.

Art historian Hal Foster, who helped define postmodernism in contemporary art in the early '80s, often returns to the concept of "fissures" as spaces of potential for a re-defined *avant-garde*. His writing on the subject resonates with the definition of "cracks" outlined above. According to Foster:

...the avant-garde that interests me here is neither *avant* nor rear [...] it is immanent in a caustic way. Far from heroic, it does not pretend that it can break absolutely with the old order or found a new one; instead it seeks to trace fractures that already exist within the given order, to pressure them further, even to activate them somehow.⁹

9 Hal Foster, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 4.



For the “no future” generation, the space for something new was not in a utopian future or a romantic vision of revolution but, instead, in the cracks or the margins. As the former-squatter/critical theory collective BILWET writes, “We always said, in the ’60s and ’70s people thought revolution was possible, that society could be fundamentally reformed. That’s bullshit. All you can do is what you do yourself, with each other.”¹⁰ Quoting Eric Santner, Foster writes that “fissures or caesuras in the space of meaning” become places where “power can be resisted or at least withstood and perhaps reimagined.”¹¹ Whereas Foster discusses fissures and cracks in a theoretical sense, squatting takes the construct into a more concrete, pragmatic space. In other words, for squatters, the use of cracks as sites of resistance is realized in a very literal, very intimate way.

A TAZ or a crack is constituted by exploding the givenness of the existing frame of the city and cracking into it from within its boundaries. In the modern era, cracking/*kraken* can be seen not only as a Lefebvrian urban “spatial practice” but also as a far more broadly applicable de Certeauian “tactic.”¹² Within the field of modern artistic practice, avant-garde artists have largely concerned themselves with investigating the boundaries of art. As artists became ever more focused on investigating what *framed* art—what institutions, what rules, what qualities, what materials, what space, etc.—they were essentially working on deconstructing its borders from within. Over and over again, modern artistic movements have investigated the role of art in society and whether any new definition of art was sustainable or merely temporary. Attendant to this inquiry, modern artists concerned themselves with the question of art’s autonomy to mass media, popular culture, and everyday life. The great project of modern art has been in exploring these boundaries, which, in turn, has led to works which open up, destabilize, or redefine the limits of art practice.

In art, cracks often find expression and form through play or playfulness. One of the ways that we make sense of our surroundings is through play: the ability to rehearse or perform various aspects of human life within a microcosm of the surrounding environment. The most rigidly defined of these microcosms of play are called games. Both the game and the frame are bounded systems that are not apart from the whole but rather inside it, representing it, performing variations on it.

10 ADILKNO, *Cracking the Movement: Squatting Beyond the Media* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1994), p. 101.

11 Foster, *Bad New Days*, pp. 106–7.

12 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 38.



The activities of the squatters' movement in Amsterdam between 1979 and 1983 had, simultaneously, the qualities and ambitions of a game and that of a work of art. Under both interrelated models, the formation of TAZs or cracks allows new boundaries to be constructed, as long as their temporary nature is embraced. Within the squatter network and the acts of protest that were staged during these years, the practice of squatting coalesced into a brief political movement and then dissipated quickly into factionalism. The key quality of this era of squatting was its *temporary* nature and the use of media as a tool to bind resistance efforts. Although squatting continued in Amsterdam for many years afterward, this temporary autonomous zone in the cracks of the city spurred the government to respond positively to the demands of the squatters and also execute protective actions, policing its existing boundaries and re-establishing a sense of 'order'. Despite its brief appearance, the squatters' movement in Amsterdam altered the shape of the city long after its demise and inspired radical media and networking experiments in the years to come.

The four chapters of this book are arranged thematically and follow an overlapping chronological trajectory. In the first chapter, "Cracking the City," the practice of squatting in urban space serves as a metaphor and framing device for the artistic and aesthetic practices explored subsequently. The argument is that an attitude rather than a political position developed within the practice of squatting that spreads to artistic practices and, ultimately, the use of emerging network technology. The first section of the chapter looks at how the Dutch countercultural movement Provo put urban activism and art on the map in the Netherlands. The next two sections concern the dialectical relationship between Dutch artist/utopian architect/member of the Situationist International (SI) Constant Nieuwenhuys ('Constant') and SI founder Guy Debord. They outline how the squatters' movement was both an expression of Constant's *New Babylon* and a Debordian game of war, and detail how the practice of squatting in the late '70s and early '80s foregrounded emerging media and performance art in urban space.

Chapter 2, "Cracking Painting," looks more closely at artist-squatters, particularly the group of neo-expressionist painters known as De Nieuwe Wilden (The New Wild Ones). Although art schools around the country became important meeting places for artists during the late '70s and early '80s, rebellious young artists often dropped out or broke off from the more traditional curricula offered at these institutions in favor of pursuing collective DIY projects, such as starting their own bands and developing their own music/art venues in squatted spaces. Media and squatter venues like



Mazzo, W139, Aorta, and V2_ focused on media art, performances, and anarchic exhibitions. Reacting against 1970s conceptual and minimalist art, the Nieuwe Wilden painters were interested in creating an “image flow”—cracking into and occupying the “dead” field of painting. These artists used painting as a platform for a frantic outpouring of imagery, where they processed pop culture and television through a filter of raw, unpolished materials.

During this time, artists in the Netherlands benefited from generous state subsidies and social benefits as well “free” housing via the widespread practice of squatting, which gave them the time and financial resources to develop DIY art spaces and new media experiments outside of traditional art institutions. Many also benefited from the BKR (Beeldende Kunstenaars Regeling, Fine Artists Regulation), a government program established after World War II that gave artists welfare payments in exchange for artwork. This program was in crisis in the early '80s, denounced for its uncritical accumulation of “bad art.” The excess/over-production of imagery created by the Nieuwe Wilden painters is therefore mirrored in the government's accumulation of a literal mountain of artworks that was relegated to vast warehouses and eventually given away or disposed of in the '90s.

In addition to painting and making music, some of the Nieuwe Wilden painters discussed in chapter 2 were also pioneers of pirate television in Amsterdam. Chapter 3, “Cracking the Ether,” analyzes the earliest artist-led pirate TV project, PKP-TV, as an example of how squatter tactics were applied to the media. This illegal channel, which was created by the artists Maarten Ploeg (né van der Ploeg), Peter Klashorst, and Rogier van der Ploeg, made it its mission to crack open the closed medium of television. PKP and pirate cable TV in the Netherlands are situated within a longer history of both alternative TV projects internationally—such as the Videofreex and TVTV—as well as video and film-based artworks shown on television both in the Netherlands and abroad. The argument is that artist-led pirate television in the Netherlands, like squatters in urban space, cracked open the media space of television and created temporary autonomous platforms.

Attendant to this, chapter 3 looks at how pirate TV had an impact beyond television: its destabilizing influence gave voice to a short-lived political movement, De Reagering. Led by Mike von Bibikov, this absurdist performance distilled the ennui of the “no future” generation and operated under the slogan, “We have agreed that we do not agree, and we have decided not to decide.” Rabotnik TV, the successor of PKP, played a central role in De Reagering, as it provided the platform on which this type of work could



stage greater societal disruptions. The belief that pirate TV, particularly Rabotnik, was inciting squatter riots led to the government of Amsterdam shutting down all pirate broadcasters in the city in 1982.¹³

The final chapter of the book, “Passageways,” investigates the transitional period during which these early ’80s practices fed into the emerging field of new media art in the Netherlands, led by artists like David Garcia and organizations like V2_ and Mediamatic. Urban space served as a bridge and a metaphor to understanding how the practices of “cracking open” existing structures and creating platforms within them could be continued through the use of new media and new technological tools, primarily computer networks. The rhetoric of interactivity was initially developed around television rather than computing, starting with the 1985 media art festival Talking Back to the Media. This festival used the city of Amsterdam as a platform to “talk back” to mainstream popular culture and media, showing artworks in alternative gallery spaces and squats as well as on television and radio. Former squatter venue V2_ also transitioned during this time into an institute for “unstable media,” within which the potential for freedom and autonomy in media space was explored. Additionally, Mediamatic, which was started by a group of artists organizing video art screenings in squatted spaces in the early 1980s, transitioned into a media art magazine and a platform for new media theory during this time. By the end of the decade and in the first few years of the ’90s, a series of “networked events”—events that utilized nascent internet technology—were staged, establishing a link between former squatters (and their tactics) and the radical leftwing media art platforms, practices, and theory of the ’90s.

On one side of the passageway described in chapter 4 is the city and, on the other, is the digital city. The conclusion of this book addresses the creation of the internet portal De Digitale Stad in early 1994, arguing that it is the culmination of the tactical media practices and platform-building outlined in the previous chapters. From the city to the *digital* city, the period covered in this book bridges the fuzzy divide between old and new media. More pressingly, however, this book aims to investigate the specific origins of new media art, how it has been defined and developed, and what histories influence not only the works themselves but the discourse

13 Grootveld, interview by author; “Kabelnet in Amsterdam afgesloten voor piraten,” *NRC Handelsblad*, October 23, 1982; “Elektronisch systeem weert signaal van radio-piraat op kabel,” *De Volkskrant*, October 16, 1982; “Burgemeester Polak Weert Televisiezender Kraak Beweging A’dam,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, October 20, 1982.



they participate in. Paradoxically, what we call internet art was not born purely as a product of computer networking but rather as part of a longer history of media tactics that began with squatters and the ideal of urban autonomy.

