

Is it only in totalitarian regimes that art often functions as the last resort for expressing one's opinion in public, or could art play the same role in so-called democracies where public debate is, at times, dominated and stifled by voices taking and being granted the seemingly exclusive right to speak? In this respect, could there be ground for comparison between, say, Dutch colonial rule over the Netherlands East Indies and Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime on the one hand and contemporary, democratic Dutch and Indonesian societies on the other? A recent event at Holland's historic Radio Kootwijk examined the possibilities.

'No False Echoes': polyphony in colonial and post-colonial times

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These are two important issues raised by Rotterdam-based artist Wendelien van Oldenborgh in her work 'No False Echoes'. This sound and video installation is presented as part of the 'Be(com)ing Dutch' exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, May - September 2008. The title of the installation is derived from a metaphor used in Rudolf Mrázek's chapter on modernity and communications in early 20th century Netherlands East Indies.¹ The metaphor refers to Dutch colonial policies on the first radio connections between the Netherlands and the Netherlands East Indies as well as the institutionalisation of radio within the colony. These policies aimed at preventing any unwanted voices or ideas from entering the Netherlands East Indies broadcasting spectrum, specifically socialist ideology from the motherland and nationalist ideology from the Indonesian republicans. Van Oldenborgh's installation uses sound and video recordings of text-based as well as spontaneous monologues and debates addressing part of this early radio history.

Van Oldenborgh conducted the recordings with her crew, invited speakers and a select audience at Radio Kootwijk, 30 March 2008. Radio Kootwijk, a monumental 1923 building in Art Deco style located in the vicinity of Apeldoorn, was the first transmitter built and owned by the Dutch government to facilitate telecommunications, particularly phone conversations, with the Netherlands East Indies and other parts of the world. It was not used by Philips Omroep Holland Indië (PHOHI), however, the first Dutch broadcasting company transmitting radio programmes to the Netherlands East Indies. This broadcasting company was established by Philips, today's multinational giant in electronic hardware, to promote the sales of their radio equipment overseas. During Van Oldenborgh's recordings at Radio Kootwijk, three invited speakers - philosopher Baukje Prins (University of Groningen), programme maker Wim Noordhoek (VPRO Radio) and the author of this article - narrated sections of René Witte's book on radio in the Netherlands East Indies² to give a short but detailed overview of the history of PHOHI. Specific references were made to PHOHI's efforts to avoid exporting *verzuijing*, or the Dutch system of organising society and its print and broadcasting media along religious and political pillars, to the colony. Van Oldenborgh attempted to recreate the ambience of a radio broadcast by locating the invited speakers on an elevated balcony in Radio Kootwijk's main hall, invisible but audible through sound amplification for the audience at the ground floor. The conversation between the speakers also included the role of radio in the rise of Indonesian nationalism, personal experiences with the arrival of the first generation of Moluccan immigrants to the Netherlands, and contemporary developments in the Dutch and Indonesian broadcasting media.



Radio Kootwijk was the first transmitter built by the Dutch to facilitate telecommunications with the Netherlands East Indies.

'If I were to be a Dutchman...'

The other main feature of the Radio Kootwijk event was the recitation of the anti-colonial manifest 'Als ik eens Nederlander was...' (If I were to be a Dutchman...) by the early Indonesian nationalist Suwardi Suryaningrat (also known as Ki Hadjar Dewantara). This reading illustrated the irony of radio being introduced in the Netherlands East Indies as an apolitical entertainment medium serving colonial, political and commercial interests, and expressing nostalgic longings for the motherland, but eventually being reverted into a highly political medium serving the independence ambitions of the Indonesian republicans. The recitation was followed by Radio Netherlands World Service journalist Joss Wibisono providing the audience with historical background information on the text and its author. However, Van Oldenborgh also deliberately re-contextualised Suwardi's text by having it recited by the Dutch-Moroccan rapper Abid Tounssi, better known as Salah Edin. Thus the text no longer only referred to the Dutch colony in times of a resurgent Indonesian nationalism, but also to the possibilities and impossibilities of contemporary immigrants trying to settle in the Netherlands and become 'true and responsible' Dutch citizens in a climate of globalisation, international terrorism and Islamophobia. Salah Edin is known for his song 'Het Land van ...' (The Country of ...), a parody on a song carrying the same title by two other rap musicians. While the original song celebrates aspects of Dutch culture, Edin's parody offers Dutch society a provocative mirror for self-reflection - in certain ways similar to Suwardi's manifest - specifically regarding forms of prejudice against immigrants of Moroccan descent.

The event at Radio Kootwijk concluded with Van Oldenborgh's nine-year old daughter Lina singing a nostalgic '*tempo doeloe*' song in Indonesian and the author of this article reciting a section from *Ketika Jurnalisme Dibungkam, Sastra Harus Bicara* (When Journalism Has Been Stifled, Literature Has To Talk), a work by the contemporary Indonesian author Seno Gumira Ajidarma.³ Ajidarma's statement referred to the New Order period, in which journalists often made use of indirect literary techniques, and artists at times took over the role of journalists, in order to enable the presentation of alternative or critical viewpoints in an Indonesian public

sphere much constrained by the threat of censorship. During long periods in Indonesian history, radio journalism has been stifled too, with Dutch, Japanese and Indonesian colonial and neo-colonial powers attempting to reduce radio to a medium of mere entertainment and/or propaganda. Today, in the context of the process of social, political and economic reform known as *Reformasi*, Indonesian journalism should be able to speak for itself, enjoying a similar degree of freedom of speech as enjoyed by many generations of Dutch journalists. However, it is precisely this assumption of press freedom in contemporary Indonesian and Dutch societies that seems to be questioned by Van Oldenborgh's project. Particularly due to the immense commercialisation of the media in both societies, most of their airtimes are filled with entertainment, without any room for 'false echoes' - such as Dutch-Moroccans creatively expressing their concern or discontent about negative attitudes towards immigrants - and rather resonating the old PHOHI policies. Both societies seem to be undergoing an 'ecstasy of communication', to borrow from Baudrillard,⁴ with so much noise and such a lack of diversity, depth and dialogue in the air.

Then, again, is it still up to artists such as Seno Gumira Ajidarma in Indonesia and Salah Edin and Van Oldenborgh herself in the Netherlands to offer alternative spaces for genuinely 'false' discussion? Van Oldenborgh's sound and video materials certainly provide a certain polyphony or multi-layeredness that would make it very unlikely, unfortunately, to be broadcast by any of the Dutch commercial television channels. This is not to say that even when exhibited in a gallery or museum, the work's polyphony might not have disturbing effects. The audience attending the Radio Kootwijk event at times understandably seemed to be overwhelmed and feel uncomfortable with digesting and contextualising the thickness and diversity of the information provided. There are also risks involved in bringing together such diverse topics in a single work of art, ranging from the history of a Dutch colonial radio enterprise, the rise of an Indonesian national consciousness and the arrival of Moluccan immigrants in the Netherlands to contemporary Dutch and Indonesian media policies and the cultural dilemma's of the second- and third-generations of Dutch-Moroccans.

Intersections and divergences

At the same time, however, the work's polyphonic structure embeds a call for deeper understanding and dialogue, and underlines the necessity to put contemporary problems linked to globalisation and immigration both into geo-political and historical perspectives. The different narratives and histories presented should not be seen as similar, or even as comparable necessarily, but as parallel stories about worlds that at certain points intersect and are suitable for comparison, and at other points divert to disappear at different horizons. The artist Van Oldenborgh deliberately does not want to specify where and how the intersections and divergences happen, but stimulates the audience to get involved in an endless play of association, interpretation and reflection in reaction to the sounds and images they are confronted with. It is to be hoped that Van Oldenborgh's installation in its final montage and display at the Van Abbemuseum will indeed not only include echoes unnoticed or disrespected from the past and the present, but also provoke the endless production of many more false tunes and discords in the future.

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1 'Let Us Become Radio Mechanics', in Mrázek, Rudolf. 2002. *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

2 *De Indische Radio-Omroep: Overheidsbeleid en Ontwikkeling, 1923-1942*. 1998. Hilversum: Verloren.

3 *Ketika Jurnalisme Dibungkam Sastra Harus Bicara*. 1997. Yogyakarta: Yayasan Bentang Budaya.

4 'The Ecstasy of Communication', in Foster, Hal (ed.). 1987. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Washington: Bay Press.

