

## Antagonism

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My parents were born in two villages on the North Sea coast, separated only by a stretch of dunes. It takes you an hour to walk along the beach from one village to another while the hazy sight of the Scheveningen pier accompanies you all the way. I suppose it doesn't get any more Dutch than this. It is part of my identity; I am inseparably bound to it. Nonetheless, I have never felt connected with it.

Whenever I leave Amsterdam to visit the twin villages, I feel a certain sense of reluctance, a sense even of shame. Contrary to my parents, I was born and raised in Amsterdam. As early as childhood, I was aware that when they spoke about their roots, it was always with a sense of relief at having managed to escape from it all. Later in life, when this early awareness had developed into a more concrete feeling of complicity, I never again heard either of my parents utter a single acknowledgement of their triumphant departure—even though, or maybe precisely because, I repeatedly provoked them to do so.

One time, after visiting my grandparents, my father took me and my younger brother to the shore drive. I was seated on a brick ledge overlooking the steps down to the beach, observing passers-by and making disparaging comments about them. My brother laughed at my sarcasm as always. My father had been gazing absent-mindedly at the sea, with his hands tucked away in his jacket pockets.

I said, looking at a man coming up the stairs, "What an arrogant face he has."

My father looked at me distractedly.

"Look who has the arrogant face," he said.

My brother observed my reaction with an agonised expression. The comment had been so scornful that I was genuinely awestruck. Not only because my father had become so angry all of a sudden, but also because I had always believed that he silently enjoyed his children's mockery—it was as though we expressed what he thought. In retrospect I even think that was the whole point of my attitude. But in that instance it became clear that we, his children, should find our own way of relating to our family's history. There was no escape from it, just like moving to another place had been no real escape for him.

Maybe I mention this story because it illustrates the doggedness with which I have always rejected what I considered a Dutch identity. I have never cherished it or felt proud of it. My feelings towards it can best be described as suspicious and deeply insecure. One of the earliest manifestations of this insecurity was a sleepover at my aunt and uncle's, who were living in the same village my father came from.

My parents were atheists. They had taught me that the family's belief in God was "only a tradition". This "knowledge" completely undermined my aunt and uncle's authority. At the dinner table, resisting laughter during family prayer was an enormous effort in restraint. The next day I joined my three nieces to children's mass. I only have fragmentary memories of what we did that day, but I do remember a

traumatic feeling of being shut out, not being able to recite prayers and sing along, not being able to make sense of the strange rituals every child around me seemed to understand. I felt incredibly lonely. The thought of a young version of myself sitting apathetically amidst the flock of chanting kids still makes me cringe.

I nearly forgot about this feeling until the day one of those nieces, who is about my age, got married—yet another thing my parents taught me to regard with scepticism. When I congratulated my aunt after the ceremony, she said proudly: “Have you learned something today?”

Learn something? I was indignant at being asked this question, the insinuation of a certain disobedience on my part. I saw it as an affirmation of what I thought she stood for: conformism. She was one of those who tried to lure me into compromise, regardless of good intentions. And that, ultimately, has been my definition of Dutch identity: the pressure to conform, leading to extreme averageness—the complete loss of everything that constitutes a unique person.

I have always felt drawn towards non-conformist subcultures. In fact, the attraction towards opposition has determined major choices in my life, as well as many difficulties. In primary school, I despised the popular upper-class children in my group. I had to put up with bullying for it, but I remember distinctly that it had already become a matter of principle to be against them. In secondary school, I joined a hardcore punk band and became a vegan straight edger, criticising capitalist consumerism, using extremely loud music as an antidote to what was shown on music television. But of course, to become an artist was by far the most significant choice—and arguably the most non-conformist.

My decision led to misgivings. I remember being given a multiple-choice questionnaire in class. Our answers were supposed to lead to a career prospect, which would in turn be used by the dean to advise us on study trajectories. When I completed the form and calculated the outcome, the test suggested *farming* as my discipline of preference. The apparent unusualness of my choice was underscored at the graduation ceremony, when the school principal announced his students’ career choices. Almost everybody in my year would proceed to study Economics and Law. When he got to me, the principal hesitated and said: “And Nickel, it seems, wants to become a painter.”

A painter? I wanted to be a *photographer*, which was a crucial difference to me. But applying for art school, to his thinking, was apparently synonymous with the wish to become some sort of craftsman. Later my French teacher, who had always encouraged me, told me that some of his colleagues had been disappointed by my career choice. He had overheard their conversation in the teacher’s room. “Art? And he used to be so bright.” That, to me, was the epitome of Dutch thinking.

Art academy was no different, except that there were more like me there. It never took me long to find something to be opposed to, and near the end of my studies that thing turned out to be photography itself. I refused to show images in my graduate exhibition and read a text instead. I went on to become a writer within the art world: working with the least visual medium within a context dominated by images.

Still, it came as a surprise that very early on in the group process that led to this book, the other members established that my position towards the issues at hand was based on negative definitions. The topic our process revolved around was “cultural diversity”. I couldn’t—or wouldn’t—relate to those words, certainly not in artistic terms. Being the only participant with an unmixed Dutch background, I felt a potential danger of becoming a representative of the Netherlands in spite of myself. On the other hand, I didn’t feel I had much to offer in response to the other group members’ “complex” histories. I felt *different*.

Throughout the evolution of the project, I kept thinking that the only cultural diversity I could relate to was *subcultural* diversity—the diversity of antagonism that characterised my youth and adolescence, and had been crucial in my choice for art. To me, being an artist or a punker was a much more legitimate position than being Dutch. So in an attempt to relate to the topic of “identity”, I dismissed it as a cultural issue, and chose to see it as a psychological phenomenon instead. I turned it into a much less involuntary matter, into something I could feel opposition towards.

This cultivation of a double-antagonism (as a choice of subject *and* as an attitude) also affected the form of my contribution. Although I had initially been asked to participate as a writer, my artistic role would remain vague until the end. First, I made it clear that my working method was more ambiguous than that of a commissioned writer. I became a full contributor and participated in the conceptualisation like the others. It was decided, however, that I would not be taking part in any exhibitions. During the group excursion to Iran, I felt that I needed to contribute to the Tehran show nonetheless, as an essential part of the process. And now also the final exhibition in the Netherlands includes a visual work of mine.

In hindsight, you could say that I was acting out a programme that had been instilled in me, and the process actually consisted of my gradual realisation. The central topic was no longer a subject of study, something I could think *about* and write *about*. No, my relation to it had itself become subject to study; that is, I had personally become an example of it, I *embodied* it. I suddenly realised that I wasn’t just analysing some foreign object, I was analysing *myself*—with the loss of narrative, the loss of subjects, as a consequence. The only protagonist in my contribution would be me, and the only parameters would be reality.

It has always been my opposition towards things that constituted my identity. But defining oneself solely by stating what one is not, is a subtractive force. It creates a hollow, which consequently needs to be filled up with positive definitions—only in order to be broken out of again. This is a self-sustaining system driven only by response towards the surroundings. The surroundings become a form of confinement; they create a negative space that could not have existed if it were not for the surrounding positive spaces. Therefore, the negative space is an affirmation of that which it excludes: atheism is an affirmation of religion, punk is an affirmation of bourgeois, iconoclasm is an affirmation of image culture and, similarly, denying there is such a thing as a Dutch identity implies the simultaneous invention of it. It is that inversion that forms the heart of all antagonism: that rather than being against

something, it is the feeling the other is *against you*—which is to say, that the other is seeing you.

Let's assume that your response to a certain situation is always the same; it is a reflex, a mode to relate to the world. To unlearn it, there are two possibilities: either your response to situations should be different for once, to see what happens. Or new surroundings should throw you off balance in such a way that you can only respond differently to how you normally would.

We were in Iran for only a very brief two and a half weeks, but the trip included producing work, installing a show, meeting and working with local artists, moving independently through the major cities and visiting sites of historical, cultural and political significance. The text I contributed to this book forms a fictionalised travelogue of this journey.

My time there was a rift. The means by which I had established my identity thus far were suddenly invalid. The confining nature of the surroundings was a given, and within its boundaries everybody was an antagonist. Nobody was a visual artist or a writer in a strict sense; everybody was a dilettante in both, with a multitude of other job titles on his or her business card. Nobody was a punker, because it was forbidden; but if going to an illegal concert meant that you were, then you gracefully accepted it. In other words, one did not accept a distinct social status, because that implied participating in society, abiding by its rules, giving in.

But what did that make me? A Dutchman? A Westerner? An established artist? If I explained to someone: 'I don't feel Dutch,' or: 'I don't comply with the word artist,' the other had an expression of total understanding, while at the same time considering me, I'm sure, a perfect example of what I denied being.

Iranians weren't interested in which western values I opposed, whether it was bourgeois, capitalism, commercialism, religion, science. They did not see me as the negative remainder of all these things, simply because these things were not similarly applicable in Iran: they were not 'shapes' at all. Instead, I felt like I was being perceived as an individual with a different perspective on their world and vice versa, in effect becoming a point of reference.

I spent most of my time there in the company of people who wanted to show me things, and wanted to know my opinion on them. I have never been asked the question: 'What do you think of this?' more often. It seemed like my presence there as an observer was needed for some reason: to reflect on the things they held before my eyes. This may sound abstract, but if you consider the enormous effort that young Iranians undertook to ensure the world saw the protests following the elections of June 2009, in spite of all the measures against them, it seems that, above all else, they want to tear down the walls that isolate them from the perspective of others.

The position of being the other came naturally to me in Iran. It didn't need to be reinforced by opposition; it was entirely self-evident.

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