

# Cuts make the country better

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“Cuts make the country better,” proclaimed Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte in 2011 as he proceeded to carry out €900 million in government spending cuts, €200 million of which targeted his country’s fabled arts funding. This quotation, borrowed by artists François Lemieux and Edith Brunette for their show’s title, first appears inverted in a black-vinyl mask occupying articule’s storefront window. Rather than being intended as an obfuscation of this ideological catchphrase for impressionable passersby, this overturned sign is better understood as a redirection back inside the gallery. Considering the subject matter—the cultural policy of a faraway nation—you could say that Brunette and Lemieux go out to come in.

When you enter, the large wall to the left is pasted with dozens of yellow letter-size pages arrayed in tiers arranged according to broad terms such as “solidarity,” “the market,” and “cucumbers.” Each sheet, adjacent to its French or English translation, displays a sans-serif statement lined up under the keyword. Though it consistently speaks in

the second-person tense (“For you, the budget cuts are not really a big deal. DIY also means that you manage things on your own.”), the author’s voice is indistinct, partly because of the heterogeneous and, indeed, contradictory viewpoints. You, the reader identifying with or rejecting the skipping gradation of outlooks, become the “you” being addressed here, curving the *parole* inward. It therefore reads like a choose-your-own-adventure book untethered from any single narrative, a schizophrenic sounding board—at times elegiac, at times adaptable.



Crédit photo: Edith Brunette et François Lemieux, extrait de la vidéo "Cuts Make the Country Better".

These statements were culled (and edited for tense) from a number of interviews conducted by the artists in Holland in 2014. Three screens sitting on tulip-sporting plinths display the long-form footage of these exchanges, which fea-

ture dozens of artists, curators, administrators, designers, and initiators of artist-run-spaces. Simply edited with only intermittent pauses, the talking heads discuss their positions at length, one after the other, with the notable absence of the interviewers. Although these art-world figures don't match the most representative national census—no Liberal Party or Christian-Democrat politicians here, no Jan the plumbers—you do get an idea of the breadth of sentiments within a certain segment of the population: those with the most to lose. And even here, you don't find consensus.

The video documentation presents diverse narratives on the logic and effects of, and personal positions regarding, a cultural crisis that caught an art world unprepared, fragmented, unorganized. There was a sense of the inevitable for many of these individuals, and yet the immensity of the cuts—and the destructive rhetoric that accompanied them—was still surprising. The story that they embody, some through disgusted adjustment, others through avowed opportunism or reflections on their disenfranchisement, is that of neoliberal cultural policy. What at times can feel like a nebulous global conspiracy got a full dress rehearsal in the Netherlands, with all of the mandatory props deployed. An economic crisis, a rejection of multicultural society, anti-elitism and pro-traditionalism, and good ol' faith in the market all contributed to the scenario. You hear in the testimonials a reckoning with a novel and irreversible change of character, under which all artists must take on the guise of entrepreneurs. On the other hand, you hear criticism of an art world that had been increasingly distant from society at large.

It is no accident that in Canada, in a place like articule (part of a breed of ever-rarer neighbourhood-level artist-run centres), this tale has a timely and dire resonance. Its live quality, symbolized by the large workshop table placed in the space, is, moreover, emphasized by the series of events punctuating the space over the show's duration. At the closing of the show, a more condensed edit of the interviews was screened on a grey rectangle proportionate to a giant flag of the Netherlands painted on the wall. This grey rectangle had hosted a screening of films by Belgian filmmaker Jef Cornelis, whose television documentaries of the postwar European art scene were noted for portraying the dissent internal to such international events as Documenta and Sonsbeek. The grey rectangle probably would have hosted a slideshow in a presentation by the Montreal collective *Entrepreneurs du Commun*, had the event not been cancelled in solidarity with the announcement of a major student protest being waged against the Quebec government's austerity politics and against the federal government's menacing "anti-terrorism" laws that threaten protest *tout court*. The grey rectangle therefore stands as a screen for projecting historical dissonance, as much as it sits as the shadow of the Dutch flag, waiting for the analogy to ripen in other vivid colours.

In a statement, Brunette and Lemieux ask, "Who wrote the rules of this game and why do we accept them? Perhaps it is too late in the game to pose this question." Adjacent to the large table is a clever footnote on the absurdity and unpredictability of these rules: cucumbers that visitors can freely and artfully carve with available paring knives. A subsidy roughly equivalent to the amount cleaved from art

went to Dutch cucumber farmers, whose abundant goods were previously blamed for an outbreak of E. coli and banned from European distribution. The culprit was later found to be Germany (go figure).

*Cuts Make the Country Better* looks to the new rules that apply to artists in the Netherlands to get a foretaste of things to come here in Canada. Communicated through an informational aesthetic are strategic insights (forming better links across disciplines couldn't hurt) and warning signs (when the money starts pumping up the larger institutions, the axe of populism could soon swing low), which perhaps could have been further developed. But the stronger impression, brought on by the divergent accounts clustering around the keywords like sardonic linguistic exercises, and the irresolution of the show's final unmoderated Q&A, is that of a general question for the art world of where it thinks it fits in national culture and society; and that "it" means "you."