

# The Provo Bicycle Trick: Radical Form as Vehicle for Pedestrian Content

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Witte Feitsnplan flyer  
from author's collection



Witte Feitsnplan action, Image from the  
IISG archive - <http://socialhistory.org/>

The pamphlet bearing the title *PROVO's Fietsenplan* (Provo's Bicycle Plan) is addressed to “Amsterdammers” and begins with a polemical assertion couched in a mixture of terms borrowed from leftist militancy and the ecstatic, surrealist (or merely absurdist) mysticism of beatnik rhetoric: “The asphalt terror of the motorized bourgeoisie has gone on long enough. Accident victims are human sacrifices offered up to the new authority to which the masses have surrendered: the automotive authority. Carbon monoxide is his stifling incense, his image [effigy] has ruined canals and streets in their thousands.”<sup>1</sup> The pamphlet appeared on the streets of Amsterdam in 1966 announcing a “happening” called the *Witte Fietsenplan* or “White Bicycle Plan”. The plan’s author was an industrial designer named Luud Schimmelpennink who had fallen in with a group of *nozems* (hooligans or bored, shiftless youth in popular Dutch parlance) known as the Provos. Schimmelpennink’s plan called for a fleet of fifty bicycles to be painted white and, in a parallel act of anti-authoritarian sacrifice, made available to the public to be used as desired and, afterward, left unlocked to be taken by others. As a practical “plan” — in the sense of a “business plan”, or of city planning — the *Witte Fietsenplan* is a reasonable, if optimistic, piece of transportation-management thinking that has inspired a range of campus bicycle sharing and urban bike rental schemes aimed at providing flexible, emissions-free alternatives to private cars. The intensity of the project’s rhetoric and the consequences that it precipitated, however, suggest that Schimmelpennink and the Provos were playing for larger stakes. In order to understand the implications of the *Witte Fietsenplan* for both politics and urbanism in the context of 1960s Amsterdam, it is necessary to map its structure in the terms of a happening: what happens in it, and what parts are played by texts, such as the pamphlet, and objects, such as the bicycles.

Literally, what happened at 3:00pm on July 28, 1966 — the hour at which the “public and media” were invited to a presentation of the *Witte Fietsenplan* — was that the Provos and the crowd of spectators who had gathered to watch the event were attacked by the police and the bicycles confiscated. In the estimation of its planners, this rendered the project a resounding success both in its own terms and as one of the “White Plans” that had become a central element of Provo practice. White Plans shared a similar structure in that they take up a symbolic object and attach a plan for the city or a set of demands asked of the authorities to it. These plans were then presented in a performed event, in which the symbolic object, if not already white, was painted white and deployed in such a way as to make visible the contradictions of power and provoke a response from the authorities. The Provo’s fifty bicycles were not sufficient to create a working system that could replace cars in the streets of Amsterdam, but they were able to pose a set of pointed questions as to why such a thing was impossible in the current situation. By creating an open script — one that pulls people into roles of spectators and participants, both willing and unwilling — White Plans function as performance. Acting as the rules of a game, the pamphlets provide a script or score for the events that are to take place and the white-painted objects become both props and iconic game tokens. Whatever the content of a specific White Plan, the name of the game, as well as the name of the players, is Provo — short for provocation.

The *Witte Fietsenplan* was effective both in its symbolism and as a provocation. The police response was spectacularly and disproportionately extreme and served to amplify the Provo’s message rather than suppress the project. The media was fed a sensational story, and photographs were taken of the rioting crowds, the brutal police and the confiscated bicycles being taken away in trucks. The Provos were able to generate sympathy for their cause and appeal both to Dutch cultural mythology and to Amsterdam’s tradition of anti-authoritarian sentiment by making comparisons to the commandeering of bicycles by the Nazis during the bleak last winter of the Second World War. The official rationale for the seizure of the white bicycles was not, however, authoritarian but that — in not being owned by anyone, in a way that it was impossible for any object in the capitalist city to be — they “encouraged theft”. As much as

anything, this tortured logic is a testament to the Provos' skill in forcing the police into inept theorizations of the social order that they were charged with protecting. It also evidences some of the conflicts and contradictions troubling urban space, as a symbolic order, in Amsterdam of the mid 1960s, which provide some context to the ferocity of the official response to what was primarily an act of symbol-making. It was, in fact, by driving a wedge into these contradictions that *Witte Fietsenplan* was able to set the semiotic trap that the police would fall so neatly into. July of 1966 was the middle of the second summer of Provo. The movement had begun the summer before as little more than street theater or a series of clownish Dadaist performances. By its third summer Provo would swell into a volatile and amorphous mass movement of workers, students, and a new, ascendant political subjectivity that did not fit comfortably into either of these categories. In that summer the movement would erupt into the "Provo Riots" that, in the small provincial context of Amsterdam, would challenge the social order every bit as much as the strikes in Paris and the other uprisings of 1968. If this trajectory was apparent to the authorities they, nonetheless, remained powerless to resist either the force of the movement or its ability to pull them into being unwilling or unwitting collaborators.

Provo — as a distinct movement with a name, an official color (white), and eventually a logo and a magazine and all the other essential trappings of an "identity" — emerged in the summer of 1965, from a series of performances or "games" staged by Robert Jasper Grootveld. Grootveld was at this point already a fixture of a burgeoning performance art scene in Amsterdam. This scene developed primarily from two sources, one literary and the other artistic. Beat poetry readings — organized by Simon Vinkenoog and others — developed from simple readings of text to become elaborately staged theatrical events. Performance art "happenings" either inspired or explicitly authorized by the Fluxus Group then put Dutch artists into contact with members of Fluxus and the Zero Group and introduced Amsterdam audiences to their Cagian model of performance practice. Willem de Ridder, who was then also a music promoter and editor of the popular music magazine *Hit Week*, staged most of the Fluxus happenings in Amsterdam and seems to have been as comfortable producing performance art events as he was rock concerts. De Ridder's dual role of artist/curator and event promoter can be seen a popularization of the refiguring of artistic production effected by Cage and the Fluxus Group in adapting the form of music, with a score that is read and "played" by performers, to create performative, event-based art. The performances that Cage, La Monte Young and their circle, initially termed "happenings" began as experimental jazz concerts in which an audience watched performers interpret and improvise on an abstract score. These progressed to more interactive and immersive events in which the distinction between audience and performer was erased and then finally onto the production of "Flux Kits," which, like games, contained instructions and "props" allowing users to enact a performance themselves. Fluxus artists found that the new art required that new spaces and organizations be developed to produce and stage events. This was especially true as happenings expanded to become continuous, ongoing modes of living in the city and Fluxus, in New York, turned from working in studios and displaying work in galleries to organizing artist co-ops for living and working in the vacant, devalued spaces of post-industrial SoHo. As the forms of "non-object" art became mapped onto the city and translated into and "non-object" architecture and urbanism, artistic practice would become entangled with and incorporated into the scripted relational systems of politics, economics and city management in new ways.

In the Dutch context, performance art's immediate engagements were with cultural forms, both in fine art and popular culture such as the music scene, and with forms of political practice. One of the first explicitly identified "happenings" produced in Amsterdam was *Mars Door Amsterdam* (March Through Amsterdam), staged in 1962 by Willem de Ridder and his collaborator Wim T. Schippers under the auspices of the *Association for Scientific Research in New Methods of Recreation* (AFSRINMOR), a group they had established with Stanley Brouwn to "encourage new forms of perception."<sup>2</sup> In a minimalist abstraction of the form of a political demonstration, posters were printed in black Helvetica bold font advertising the march but giving no mention of its purpose or content. When the actual happening took place, six men walked a prescribed route from Amsterdam's central train station to Dam Square. They passed



Robert Jasper Grootveldt performing in Spui square. Image from the IISG archive





inconspicuously through the crowds who were following a similar path for other reasons and remained imperceptible to anyone who did not know what to look for and that what was happening was art.

In contrast, Grootveld's performances were more ecstatic and convulsive than this. He presented himself less as an artist than as an eccentric activist for the legalization of marijuana and against the use of tobacco. Himself a heavy smoker, Grootveld began his anti-tobacco campaign by defacing cigarette billboards with the word "cancer" written in tar and by carrying a chloroform soaked rag into tobacco stores to fill them with the smell of hospitals. The intent of these actions was to shock or wake up the culture of "addicted consumers", of which he considered himself a part. Grootveld eventually secured the patronage of a wealthy restaurateur, Klaase Kroese, who gave him a storefront space to use as a studio. Grootveld converted the storefront into the "Anti-Smoking Temple" and began dressing in outlandish costumes, donning blackface and staging performances of pseudo-shamanistic "magic" rituals to counter the power of the wizards of advertising who kept the members of the "cigarette-cult" hypnotized and in the thrall of the "Nico Lord." Grootveld's performances attracted a small following among the emerging youth counterculture, which increased when he organized a series of happenings (part performance, part game or prank, and part political) called the *Marihuettegame* or "marijuana game" aimed at subverting the newly instated anti-marijuana laws and frustrating their enforcement. Grootveld would volunteer as a police informer and feed the police, who were largely ignorant of marijuana, inaccurate information, eventually tricking them into staging large-scale, high-profile raids against prepared targets in which they would arrest Grootveld's collaborators and seize various innocuous substances packaged and presented as marijuana. The newspapers — who would cover the raids avidly as perfect fodder for their readers' anxiety about and fascination with the youthful transgression — would then be notified that the police had in fact confiscated tea or hay or cat food and thus be given another amusing story about police incompetence.

This phase of Grootveld's practice came to an abrupt end in 1964 when he accidentally set fire to the Anti-Smoking Temple during a ritual and — in another instance of the police being pulled into involuntary "collaboration" (as he called it) — had to be rescued by the police officers sent to monitor the event. Kroese, having had enough, withdrew his support and Grootveld moved his activities outdoors into Spui Square, where they would develop into larger events and pull other actors into their orbit. In Spui Square stands a statue of a boy entitled "*Het Lieverdje*" ("little rascal" or "little darling") that had been commissioned by a tobacco firm and dedicated to the children of Amsterdam. Grootveld denounced the statue as a "nicotinistic demon" and began to perform rituals around it intended to transform it into a magical object. Whatever mystical effects these rituals may have had and however the idea of "magic" is conceptualized, they did effect a shift in the meaning of the square as an urban space. In becoming the site of Grootveld's performances Spui Square became of significance for the bored and alienated and a point of intersection and convergence between the city's radical and bohemian subcultures. The Provo movement was itself the product of one such intersection. In May of 1965 Roel van Duyn, who was then a student at University of Amsterdam, began distributing pamphlets among the crowd at Grootveld's performances. There had already been scuffles between the crowds gathered to watch and participate in the anti-smoking rituals and the police who they accused of blocking traffic. The press had begun to run sensational stories about the degenerate youth, and the criminologist Wouter Buikhuisen, speaking in the role of both social critic and scientific expert that social scientists increasingly assumed in 1960s Dutch culture, had coined the term "Provo" and applied it to the nosemes or delinquent youth he considered these crowds to represent. In his pamphlets van Duyn took up both the term and the concept of Provo and fashioned it into a positively defined political tendency with a manifesto and a set of polemical positions.

Central to van Duyn's positioning of Provo politically was the invocation of the concept of anarchism. Early Provo pamphlets contained short histories of Mikhail Bakunin, Paul Lafargue, and the Dutch socialist leader Domela Nieuwenhuis. Provo, however, bore little resemblance in its organization, aims or membership to either Dutch anarchist labor



*Mars Door Amsterdam*, Wim T. Schippers, Willem de Ridder



Fluxus/ Zero Group artist Yoshio Nakajima in anti-car happening

groups of the time or the anarchist movements of the nineteenth century and prewar period that van Duyn held up as examples. Rather, van Duyn seems to have been interested in, on one hand, symbolically assuming the persona of the radical militant or the lurking subversive and, on the other, defining a leftism distinct from that of organized labor and the then-only-slowly de-Stalinizing Communist Party of the Netherlands. In Van Duyn's view, the majority of Dutch workers, with their secure and tariff-protected union jobs, social services and public housing, had been bought off and assimilated into the ranks of the comfortable middle class — termed *klootjesvolk* or “testicle people” in Provo parlance. If class struggle was to remain an engine of social transformation then Van Duyn was convinced the terms of class must be redefined and a new class called into existence. To this new class he named, somewhat ironically, the Provotariat. A 1967 English language version of The Provo Manifesto, first published in 1965, describes the Provotariat as:

*Provos, beatniks, pleiners, nozemes, teddyboys, rockers, blousons noirs, hooligans, mengupi, students, artists, misfits, ban-the-bombers.... Those who don't want a career and who lead irregular lives: those who come from the asphalt jungles of London, Paris, Amsterdam, New York, Moscow, Tokyo, Berlin, Milan, Warsaw and who feel ill-adapted to this society.... The Provotariat is the last element of rebellion in our 'developed' countries. The Proletariat is the slave of the politicians. Watching TV. It has joined its old enemy, the bourgeoisie, and now constitutes with the bourgeois a huge, grey mass. The new class opposition in our countries is the Provotariat against this mass. But the Provotariat is not a class – its make-up is too heterogeneous for that.*<sup>3</sup>

However heterogeneous the Provotariat may have been or appeared to be, the commonality shared by the inhabitants of van Duyn's categories is that they are defined by their production and deployment of symbols. Artists, demonstrators, *pleiners* (in Dutch, those who occupy the *plein* or public square), and *blousons noirs* (in French, the wearers of black motorcycle jackets) are all defined not in materialist terms but by how they make and use signs and images. The Provotariat is differentiated, “colorful” (or Provo white), and defined against the undifferentiated (however highly specialized) “grey mass” of *klootjesvolk* middle class consumers. It is in this sense that Provo appears as a postmodern, as well as postmodernist tendency, and among the first movements to be fully articulated as such.

The contentment and homogeneity of “grey mass”, “surrendered to the automobile authority” that Provo set itself in opposition to, marks the *klootjesvolk* as the political subjectivity whose creation had been central to the post-war project of building a stable, peaceful social-democratic society in Europe. Modernist architecture — defined as a social, if not political, movement under the auspices of the *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM) — had seen its radical leftist elements decimated and dispersed by Stalinism in the Soviet Union and by the Second World War in Europe, and its more technocratic and politically agnostic figures come to the fore. Led by Le Corbusier and Sigfried Giedion, this tendency in modernist architectural discourse had before the war promoted visions of rationalized “linear cities” in which the efficiency of the industrial assembly line and clear spatial/formal diagrams cleanly separating the “four functions” of housing, industry, circulation and leisure. The political promise held out by this urban vision was that increased productivity and the comforts of hygiene and spatial order would ensure an orderly, yet liberatory society, assuage the causes of class struggle and obviate the need for violent insurrection. Of the four functions, circulation is both the most performative, in that its form is that of motion rather than matter, and the most “functional” in that the purpose and mechanisms of traffic circulation is much clearer than activities as complex as “living” or even “industry”. In this, the street was pushed towards being a space of pure circulation, unimpeded by both mundane blockages such as garbage and traffic jams and the more extreme impediments of barricades, demonstrations and street fighting. Though Le Corbusier was based in Paris and much of his thinking developed from there, the Dutch context and specifically Amsterdam figures significantly in the thinking of the modernist city. In the 1930's Cornelis van Eesteren was both the municipal architect and head of planning for Amsterdam and director of the CIAM. As director of CIAM, van Eesteren took charge of the Functional City project that presented case studies of cities around the world

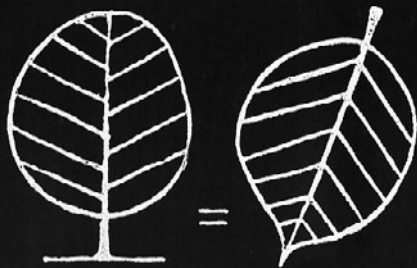


Cornelis van Eesteren, *Functional City*

analyzed through the lens of Le Corbusier's four functions and used them to articulate a doctrine of practical planning guidelines. As it was already the object of his professional work, van Eesteren decided to take up Amsterdam as the initial test case upon which to develop the project's analysis techniques, making Amsterdam the model of the *Functional City*. This may seem paradoxically dissonant with images of Amsterdam as either a picturesque tourist destination or a seething, decadent port city rife with drugs, prostitution, and bohemian libertinism. It, however, makes more sense when it is considered that Amsterdam was founded as a Hanseatic merchant port, organized around the pragmatic concerns of moving goods between docks and warehouses and, even in the height of its prosperity, was never conceived of in the monumental terms of other European capitals. An important element of the urban transformations taking place under van Eesteren's leadership was the demolition of a ring of factories from the 19th century surrounding the central canal district and the construction of residential neighborhoods in its place. This process would be emblematic of a shift in conceptions of the city's function (however functionally conceived) from that of an economic engine in which people live as a supply of labor power to being a mechanism for producing social relations and creating a certain consumable quality of life — this is, from a city with a productive function to a city whose function is reproduction.

In the immediate post-war period this shift would manifest in an alignment of modernist planning and construction/reconstruction projects with efforts to build efficient, stable, equitable welfare states free of the conflicts and divisions that had riven European society in the inter-war period. This would serve to pull architects increasingly into and intricate and rapidly developing apparatus of technocratic planners, city managers and social scientists that was initially concerned with increasing the productivity of and — as productive capacity outstripped basic needs — creating jobs for this newly homogenized population. The great hope of these projects was to replace adversarial class structures and fraught cultural distinctions with efficient, harmonious, ideologically neutral organizations of both people and spaces according to their productive capacities. Foundational to this mode of planning is a regime of abstraction in which society and the space it constructs and inhabits is figured as a cybernetic system of material relations, information exchange and generalizable spatial arrangement.

By the 1960's this regime had reached a point of crisis in which Architecture was pulled between two distinct poles. On one hand an investment in completely abstract ordering systems worked to pull the discipline away from politics and the city altogether. On the other, the reduction of lived experience entirely to the functional relations of (more-or-less alienated) production and consumption threatened to turn architects into hapless managers of machine cities continually breaking down and being undone by the irrationalities of human life that they must contain. The architecture of the grey mass would be pitted against figures writ on the blinding white, blank page of *tabula rasa*. Cage's dissolution of the art object into transitory events appears to employ the same forces that, in Marx's terms, creates the conditions under which "all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life and his relations with his kind."<sup>4</sup> When a group of young architects were asked to organize the tenth meeting of CIAM in 1953, the task of resolving this crisis was largely passed on to what was hoped would be a new generation of modernism. The British and Dutch components of this group — dubbed "Team 10" — were, respectively, Alison and Peter Smithson and Aldo van Eyck, and, they would work in dialog with one another into the 1960's. Both van Eyck and the Smithsons would concern themselves with adapting concepts from structuralist linguistics and anthropology to architecture in ways similar to how these were being applied to critical and cultural theory. In this the space of the street would figure heavily as the interface between the public and private spheres in which the social interactions that make up the "structure" of a culture take place within the support armature of architectural structure. Van Eyck was especially interested in children as emblematic of unformed urban subjectivity that was free to engage in the construction and reconstruction of societal forms through play. Working for the city of Amsterdam in a capacity similar to, though apparently less powerful than van Eesteren's, van Eyck would design a series of urban playgrounds that would insert functionally indeterminate structures, open to being improvisationally interpreted and inhabited, into spaces left empty or abandoned



tree is  
leaf and leaf  
is tree - house is  
city and city is house  
- a tree is a tree but it  
is also a huge leaf - a  
leaf is a leaf, but it is  
also a tiny tree - a city  
is not a city unless it  
is also a huge house -  
a house is a house  
only if it is also  
a tiny city

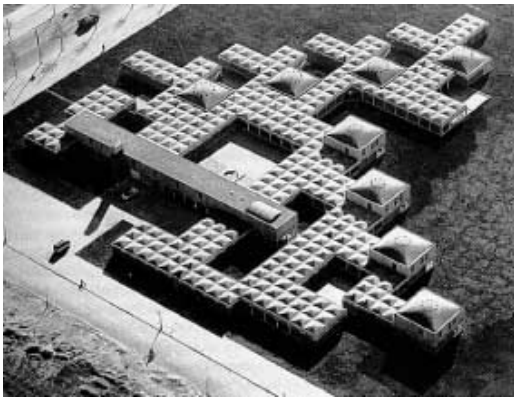
*A City is a Tree*, Aldo van Eyck,



by the war and the economic chaos that followed. Then, in newly developed agricultural land on the southern edge of the city he would design an orphanage that strove to create a pedagogical social microcosm of urban life with the intention of effecting the socialization of children alienated from family structures. This scheme was conceived of as a spreading mat of square modules, the larger of which were referred to as “houses” that would accommodate children of genders and age groups and were arranged along a meandering corridor described as a “street” in which the children could interact, play together, and develop practices of sociability, hospitality and urban culture by inviting one another into their private spheres.

Van Eyck was, however, less able than van Eesteren to engage with the planning of actual streets and large-scale, mass housing for ordinary Amsterdamers as these planning functions were increasingly distributed throughout state bureaucracy. This dynamic would become explicitly clear, and raise significant public alarm when, in 1953, Hendrik Kaasjager, the police high commissioner of Amsterdam, was asked to develop a plan to alleviate growing traffic congestion. What he put forward was essentially an urban plan calling for buildings to be demolished to straighten roadways and canals to be filled and converted into wide boulevards. Opposition to the *Plan-Kaasjager* would galvanize a preservation movement in Amsterdam that forged an uncomfortable alliance between conservative elements interested in preserving the visual character and traditional culture of the city and left-libertarian resistance to social control, the demolition of housing and the expropriation of public space. The urban discourse that Provo would emerge from was very much a product of this alliance. Provo, however, was able to avoid being simply a force of reaction by taking up modernist concepts and symbols and simultaneously pushing them forward against their limits and feeding them back into the circuits of discourse as monkey wrenches (or wooden shoes) in the conceptual mechanism. The *Witte Fietsenplan* makes a totemic cult object of the automobile that had at that point stood in modernist discourses as a symbol of freedom, mobility and the penetration of industrial technology into everyday life. In this role, cars had been figured not only as machines for transportation but as much as modernist houses, “machines for living” that made freeways and wide boulevards inhabitable and desirable and enabled linearity and functional separation in urban zoning. In parallel to this, automobiles had also become one of the premier consumer products in the schema of post-war consumer culture that was translating new technology and returned prosperity in the industrialized west into a galaxy of glittering objects invested with seemingly magical powers. Here automobiles also stood for freedom as well as power and status. In the mythology of advertising, automobiles offered their owners the ability to move around the city at will without having to use, and submit to the regulation of, mass transit. Additionally, they held out the possibility of escaping the city for the freedom of the open highway and the almost aristocratic experience of moving through the countryside as a sovereign individual — king of the road. Against this fetishistic double valorization of the automobile, Provo held up (and in iconic images of the *Witte Fietsenplan* happening, the white bicycles are not ridden but literally held above the crowd as signs) the bicycle. The last section of the *Witte Fietsenplan* pamphlet asserts, “The white bike is never locked. The white bike is the first free collectivized transport. The white bike is a provocation of Capitalists’ private property. The white bike is anarchism. The white bicycle can be used by those who need it and then left unattended again ... The white bicycle symbolizes simplicity and hygiene against the flashy nature and filth of the authoritarian car. Indeed one bike is something, but almost nothing!”<sup>5</sup>

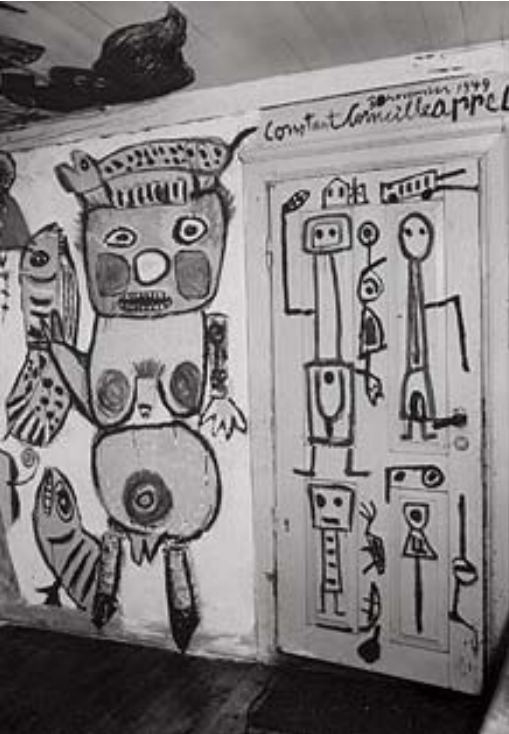
In the context of Amsterdam’s dense urban fabric defined by canals and of narrow streets, the something-that-is-almost-nothing represented by the bicycle is nothing less than the abstract script for a set of spatial practices — ways of moving around and living in the city — that underpin a conception of urban subjectivity or, to use the terms of consumer culture, “lifestyle”. If the utilitarian accommodation of the automobile as a machine had, in the *Plan-Kaasjager*, suggested one radical shift in both the image and the culture of the city, then the bicycle was held up as being both the image and agent of another. Of more concern to the Provos than the look of the city was the allocation of public, or at least open, space to parking and the application of traffic control systems to streets that had been relatively unregulated spaces in which, pedestrians, bicycles and other vehicles mixed freely, if inefficiently, and urban social life was allowed to flourish.



Amsterdam Orphanage, Play Ground, Aldo van Eyck,

In this account the street is framed as a potential-rich public space supporting the relational milieu of “street life” that was in danger of being colonized to accommodate the requirements of a fairly expensive consumer product and those who used it.

The conceptualization and valorization of the street as a space not only of sociability but also of socialization become a point of intersection between Provo and the critiques of functionalist urbanism then being developed within modernist architectural discourse by the members of Team 10. Van Eyck's conceptions of spreading, architectural matt constructions animated by radically open relational structures would also resonate into fields immediately adjacent to architecture, as when they were taken up by his close friend Constant Nieuwenhuis, who would make an art project of designing a city for the future. Nieuwenhuis, or “Constant” as he was known, had begun his career as a painter and member of the COBRA<sup>6</sup> Group that formed an important element of the Dutch postwar *avant garde*. Constant and his Danish COBRA Group colleague Asger Jorn would share a similar exhaustion with the possibilities of conventional painting and sculpture to that of the artists in Cage's circle. This would lead them to experiment with painting directly onto walls or on top of other, kitsch paintings found or bought cheaply in second hand shops in an effort to effect a subversion or hijacking of existing images and bring art out of the hermetic space of the gallery and into the world, or more precisely, the street. Jorn and Nieuwenhuis would gravitate increasingly toward Paris, where they would intersect with later phases of Dadaist literary practice such as the Letterists. In 1956, the two painters would take part in founding the *Situationist International* (SI) and become the artist members of a group that was polemically against art. Rather than painting they would contribute their visual abilities to making maps and images articulating the SI's synthesis of neo-Dadaist aesthetic concepts and Marxist-Structuralist theory to yield a conception of the city as a collection of overlapping, affective “atmospheres” and zones of desire. Opposed to this, and threatening it, the Situationists posited a “Society of the Spectacle” in which the material and experiential “reality” of the world is completely obscured by a régime of powerful, illusionary images, produced by the various elements of capitalist media, that transforms its subjects into paralyzed, passive spectators. In Situationist discourse this distrust of images would be translated into a general disdain for art in its traditional forms, which, they believed, could only work to support and affirm the spectacle. Jorn would continue to produce and exhibit paintings, and the income from sales of his work would provide significant financial support to the SI. Constant, however, would stop painting and collaborate with the SI's leader, Guy Debord, and other Situationists in developing techniques for a practice termed “psychogeography” that involved unconsciously motivated *dérives*, or drifts through the city following maps of other places, maps that had been cut up and collaged back together in new configurations, or simply the attractive pull of the atmospheres happened upon by the wanderers. *Unitary Urbanism*, as the Situationists called their theorization of urban space, counters the functional separation of the modernist city and within it the autonomous-but-alienated role for art, with an unified space of experience animated by “play”, conceived of as a libidinal, non-utilitarian activity of making and reconfiguring the world. This structuralist conception of play is in many ways parallel to van Eyck's and, indeed, both van Eyck and the Situationists took much there thinking on the matter from the book *Homo Ludens* in which Dutch sociologist Johan Huizinga identified a ludic element of culture running counter to the concerns of survival and reproduction and claims it as the essential element of humanness.



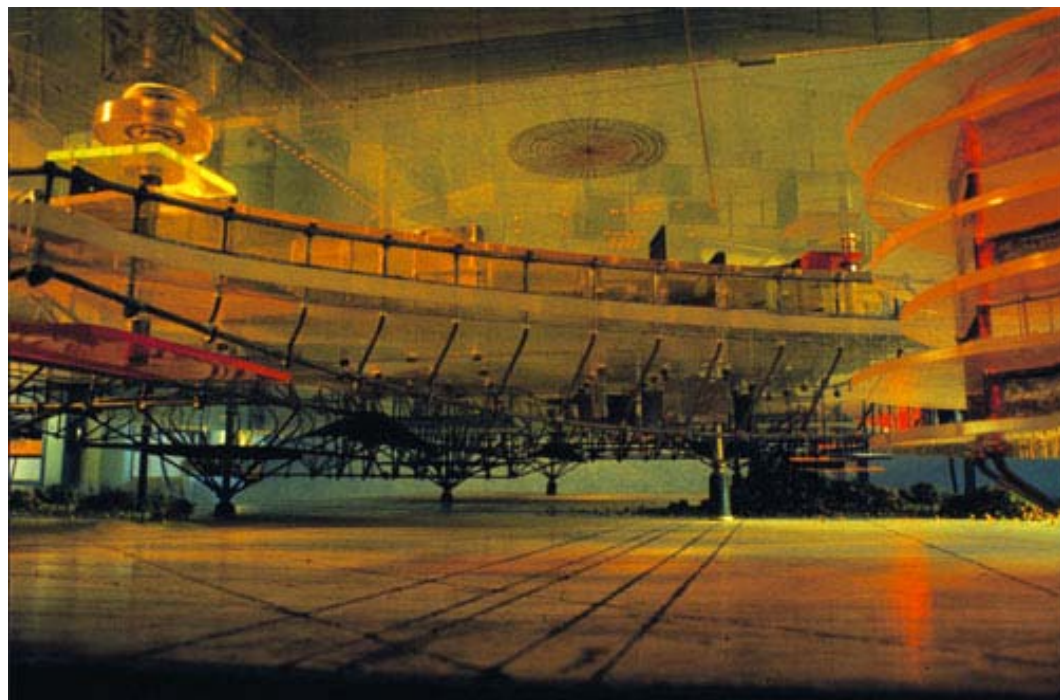
COBRA Installation, Asger Jorn

For Debord and the Paris-based Situationists the, *dérives* and the maps that went with them remained playful events to be experienced and later discussed and written about. Whatever artistic qualities they had were eclipsed in importance by their status as experiments in practice that the Situationists hoped would lead to new, revolutionary ways of living in the city. Constant would, however, continue to work in a painterly mode, producing compositions of maps collaged onto painted canvases or other maps. He began to present these map collages not as subversive re-readings of existing cities but as plans for an entirely new city designed to facilitate and intensify the experience of the *dérive* and allow it to expand into the totality of urban life. First called *Dériville* and then renamed *New Babylon*, Constant's city was a vast megastructure covering the entire globe through which humanity — liberated from all non-playful production



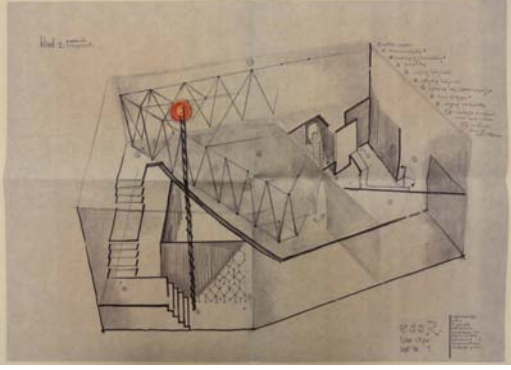


*New Babylon*, Image from the Koninklijke  
Bibliotheek archive  
<http://www.kb.nl/index-en.html>



*New Babylon Yellow Sector*, Image from  
the Koninklijke Bibliotheek archive





Plans for a labyrinth at the Experimental Studio Rotterdam, Image from the Koninklijke Bibliotheek archive.



Plans for a labyrinth at the Experimental Studio Rotterdam, Image from the Koninklijke Bibliotheek archive.



work by automated subterranean factories — would wander freely, constructing “atmospheres” and environments as they went. In addition to the collaged maps, Constant represented the architecture of *New Babylon* and elaborate models made of wire and brightly colored Plexiglas, which were then often photographed in closely cropped interior shots to show the imagined atmospheric qualities of the new urban space and suggest the endlessness and figurelessness of the construction. This has allowed the project to be taken up by architects as an image of indeterminate, open form and the freedom that it implies. It is, to a large extent, reasonable to characterize the *New Babylon* as simply a de-formalized megastructure or an extreme instance of an open matt architecture and, indeed, if any radicality is to be claimed for the project, it is necessary to sharply differentiate it from the immersive meandering of late capitalist environments and the delirium of shopping malls and mega casinos. This is, however, possible when the architecture of the *New Babylon* is considered not as an object but as a stage or stage set for the performance of a certain set of spatial practices and modes of living. This possibility presents itself in the relationship that Constant developed with Provo and the ways that he and the Provos interpreted each other's projects. Constant had resigned from the Situationist International in 1960 due, among other personal and ideological conflicts with Debord, to his continued engagement with artistic production and his increasingly obvious lack of interest in the calls for revolutionary violence and the posture of political militancy assumed by the movement's French section.

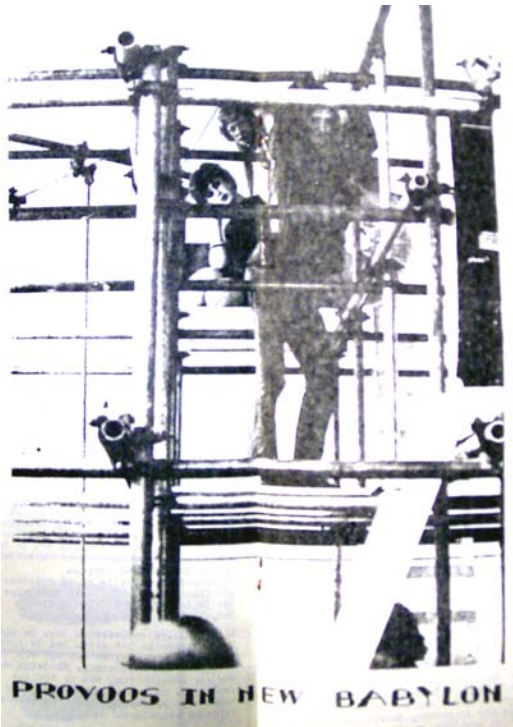
By the mid 1960s the SI had become invested in repudiating his work as having been assimilated by technocratic modernist architectural discourses. Constant had in fact secured support from a progressive, Dutch, state-sponsored construction industry group called the *Liga Nieuw Beelden* (League For New Building) to set up an “experimental studio” in Rotterdam. The *Experiential Studio Rotterdam* (ESR), adapted the form of an industry think-tank to create a platform for architectural “experimentation” in social and spatial construction. At the ESR, Constant and a group of collaborating artists, architects and other designers constructed immersive environments and built labyrinth installations made from scaffolding and doors. They also watched the development of the Provo movement very closely, seeing in it, as did the Situationists, the potential of spontaneous, self-organized, social transformation. Where the Situationists saw revolutionary insurrection, however, Constant looked for Architecture, or at least the potential for radical new spatial practices. The work of the ESR was seen very much as a component of the *New Babylon* project that Constant had been exhibiting extensively across Europe and developing into a continuously evolving total work of art. An exhibition of the *New Babylon* in the Hague included a three-dimensional scaffolding labyrinth produced by the ESR that was presented as a mock-up of the spatial conditions the project called for. The Provos seem to have been greatly impressed by this and accepted the *New Babylon* project as fitting into the format of their White Plans. Documentary photos of the installation show unidentified “provoid people”<sup>7</sup> cavorting on the scaffolding and when, in October of 1965, Constant was asked to edit *Provo* #4 (the fourth issue of the Provo magazine) and use it to present the *New Babylon* project, one such photo appears as the centerfold image bearing the title “Provos in New Babylon”. Later, in May of 1966, Constant published a manifesto entitled “New Urbanism” in *Provo* #9, in which he presents the urban-political stakes of the realignment of work and play that he sees the Provos as having effected by saying, “As soon as there is a surplus of energy available for activities other than work, recreation becomes pointless and makes way for the possibility of true creativity – the creation of a new way of life, a new environment.”<sup>8</sup> The *New Babylon* had rejected the destructive aspects of modernist urban restructuring by proposing that the megastructure housing the new city be big enough to stand over old cities on giant piers, leaving them as ruins to be visited and used as further playgrounds by its inhabitants. In positing, as he does, the Provos as the already-arrived homo ludens of the *New Babylon*, Constant would seem to suggest that they were already inhabiting Amsterdam in this way — as neither a modern functional city nor in continuity with the norms of traditional culture, but as ruin or found object to be resignified and, like a white bicycle, used as they liked. Constant's formulation neatly avoids some questions about the seriousness of the *New Babylon* as an architectural proposition that, by the mid 1960s, had begun to be asked with greater insistence. In *Provo*, he suggest, the New Babylon was already being enacted. The question then becomes whether this performance of the *New Babylon* was being accomplished

without a supporting armature of architectural construction or if there were structures being built of a new kind not before seen, or at least not seen as architecture.

If the white plans were performances of relational choreography, then the other ways in which the Provo movement was supported and propagated can be seen as larger, more open-ended projects of event staging. Provo magazine, which had been appearing irregularly but almost monthly since the summer of 1965, offered both a structure for written discourse and a template for local movements that sprang up in cities across the Netherlands. Provo groups formed in Rotterdam, the Hague, Utrecht and as far away as Maastricht and Brussels. Practices such as the occupation of a public space and the appropriation of a usually somehow objectionable monument as a center for staging events became a franchisable model developed in Amsterdam but exportable and applicable everywhere. Magazines, pamphlets and other printed matter became a major part of the material production of Provos as a group, and their publication and distribution efforts began to take on greater structural implications. Copies of Provo were initially given away for free at happenings or subversively slipped into copies of the right-wing newspaper *De Telegraaf* to ambush the unsuspecting bourgeoisie. As the movement grew, however, the Provos were able to sell the magazine at a substantial profit. To capitalize on this, a distribution scheme was devised that both supported and made use of the burgeoning Amsterdam countercultural scene that Provo had come to represent politically. Batches of magazines were given to the numerous unattached young people who had come to Amsterdam to participate in the ongoing happening that the city had become and to look for alternatives to the ways of living available to them in the places they had come from. The magazines were sold on consignment with a fixed base price going back to the Provo production group and the magazine sellers free to charge whatever markups they could get. If a magazine seller circulated energetically through the crowds of gawking tourists, bemused local residents and fellow travelers — interacting promiscuously and hustling industriously — enough money could be made to keep oneself fed and stoned. A place to sleep could then be secured in a Provo-organized crash pad in a squatted building, and suddenly the possibility lay open of inhabiting the city in a new way, complete with new forms of sociability and opportunities for experimentation and self-expression.

The production of Provo also involved developing a material infrastructure that would take on a life of its own and, especially later in the movement, exacerbate class divisions within the movement. While the more “intellectual” (or at least academically trained and politically ambitious) members of Provo leadership wrote articles and pamphlets and took on editorial roles, the working-class (but often more connected to actual Amsterdam politics and labor organizations) “street” Provos saw to the practical aspects of the provocations.<sup>9</sup> In the context of the magazine this meant finding a way to print material of little monetary value that was subject to, or even calculated to provoke, police repression. Whether due to actual censorship or not, the Provos found it difficult to interest commercial presses in printing their material. Rob Stolk, the handsome, charismatic face of the “street” Provos whose talent for seeding the popular press with clever, quotable wisecracks had already proved helpful in getting provo messages printed in mainstream newspapers, solved the problem by securing first a stencil machine and then later, as circulation grew, an offset press and setting up his own print shop. Stolk’s print shop not only allowed the provos to lay claim to the legacy of free presses in Amsterdam dating back to the reformation and gave them license to print whatever content they chose, it also became a space for discourse, experimentation and play. In addition to more serious political tracts, the shop put out a steady stream of comic magazines, humorous pamphlets, music posters and other radicalized popular pulp material that appears to be the product of both of an active intellectual milieu and many drunken evenings spent in playful experimentation with the printing equipment.

The development of Provo publishing capacity evidences the same relationship between form and content that characterizes the white plans. Just as the qualities and the significance of Provo publications lie as much in the way they were produced as in the substance of what is written in them, the white plans and other Provo actions hinge on the creation of a radical formal vehicle to bear what is often relatively pedestrian or simply pragmatic content. Even within the sparse rhetoric of the *Witte Fietsenplan*,



“Provoos in New Babylon” image from Provo No. 4, from author’s collection.



de New Babylon Informatief, a newspaper for New Babylon edited by Nic Tummers, from author’s collection.





Provo magazine covers, from author's collection.

most of the explicit practical and ideological concepts had long been articulated elsewhere. For example, a similar critique of automobiles and traffic in modernist urban planning appears in an article by Debord entitled "A Situationist Thesis on Traffic" that was published in 1959 in the third issue of the *Internationale Situationniste* (the official organ of the SI). This nine-point manifesto attacks the automobile as an agent enforcing the separations of work and leisure as well as the public and private spheres that Debord identifies as the alienating elements of modernist planning that he would to dissolve into *Unitary Urbanism*. The ninth point of Debord's thesis also animates the *Witte Fietsenplan* and it is here the larger stakes beyond cars or bicycles become clear. "Revolutionary urbanists," Debord asserts, "will not limit their concern to the circulation of things and of human beings trapped in a world of things. They will try to break these topological chains, paving the way with their experiments for a human journey through authentic life."<sup>10</sup> Provo actions break out of the "world of things" by taking up things and subversively remaking not only their functional use, but also the formal structure of how they appear and operate in the city. If the "thing" in the *Witte Fietsenplan* is the bicycle and the forms it engages with are the structures of public and private space and the mechanisms of social control manifest in the management of movement in the city, then other Provo projects can be seen as taking up both objects and non-objects as their "things" and defining different forms for them.

For this reason it is often difficult to determine to what degree to political or programmatic content of white plans and other Provo actions is important and to what degree they constitute things to be used to get to forms. This is evidenced in the way that Provo took up common leftists themes and causes of the day, including aspects of environmentalism, opposition to the war in Vietnam and protests against the build-up of nuclear weapons in Western Europe. These were fairly easy positions to adopt in progressive Amsterdam, and it is certain that most Provos had genuine sympathies with the environmental, anti-war and anti-nuclear movements. The Provos, however, were concerned with these issues primarily as symptoms of local conditions. Unlike the

Situationists, the Provos never claimed solidarity with the Vietnamese communists or other liberation struggles, and threats of nuclear war and environmental destruction were presented as the catastrophic conclusions the out-of-control cycles of over-production and mass consumption that could be seen playing themselves out on the city streets. As Stolk would later quip to an interviewer from *High Times*, “Our protests against the Vietnam war were from a humanistic point of view. We criticized the cruel massacres, but didn’t identify with the Vietcong like Jane Fonda. That’s why later on we didn’t wind up on aerobics videos.”<sup>11</sup> While it is doubtful that van Duyn, with his commitment to building a political movement, would have made a similar statement, what is clear is that their engagement with oppositional politics gave the Provos access to a lexicon of forms to deploy in their event-making. If the happenings in Spui Square refigured the form of the demonstration in a way similar to the abstraction of a protest march performed by de Ridder in March Through Amsterdam, then the first major Provo action that would define the movement beyond street performance would be based on the form of a spectacular political bombing.

In 1965 Princess Beatrix of the Netherlands announced that she would marry Claus von Amsberg, a German count who, like many German nobles, had been a Nazi party member and had joined the Hitler Youth and then the *Waffen SS* during the war. Broad anti-royalist sentiment was aroused across the Netherlands but especially in traditionally republican Amsterdam. As preparations for the wedding, planned for March of 1966, were being made, the Provos, who seem to have mostly viewed the monarchy as simply absurd rather than a real concern, initiated the *White Rumor Plan*, which appears to be the first instance of the white plan concept. The plan involved circulating wild suggestion of possible acts of Provo sabotage, ranging from the administering of LSD to the police horses, or even the public water supply, to more serious threats of a real bombing. Grootveld, who had explained the use of blackface in his costumes as identifying himself as a one of the *Zwarte Piet* (Black Pete) characters who appear in Dutch cultural mythology as the helpers and harbingers of *Sinterklaas* (Father Christmas), encouraged his fans to paint walls around Amsterdam with the slogans “*Klaas Komt*,” playing on the name Claus and the Dutch equivalent of “Santa is Coming”. In a move that was both playfully menacing and perhaps gently self-mocking, the royal wedding was transformed into the big event the youth were eagerly anticipating with Claus as the Santa Claus who would bring this revolutionary Christmas or, as the Provos whispered it, “*Klaas War*”. The wedding proceeded with high security and a great show of both force and paranoia by the police. The actual Provo attack came in the form of a smoke bomb hidden in the road and set off under the wheels of the gilded wedding carriage as the couple paraded through Amsterdam. The event was being broadcast live on television by several networks, and viewers around the world saw the alarming image of the royal carriage enveloped in cloud of smoke thick enough to leave it unclear that the bombing was a non-lethal prank and not the “real” thing. Also broadcast live, were images of the enraged and panicked police charging the, paradoxically mostly royalist, crowd on foot and on horseback and attacking people indiscriminately. Those privy to the plan were able to escape before the violence began, and the police were induced to manifest the violence of power and play the role of Nazis in a series of images, composed by the Provos and helpfully broadcast for them by the media. It was not the revolution but it created an image of Provo as an amorphous cloud capable of enveloping and obscuring authority and earned the movement sensationalist headlines in *De Telegraaf* warning breathlessly of the “White Danger”.

An efflorescence of new White Plans followed the *White Rumor Plan* and smoke bombing. Especially in the early period of 1965 these tended to focus intently in formalizing, or at least de- (and perhaps also re-) mystifying, the structures producing and organizing urban space. Of these the *Witte Huizen Plan* (White Housing Plan), authored only three months before the *Witte Fietsenplan* by Auke Boersma, would prove to have the most significant long-term impact on the political landscape of Amsterdam. The *Witte Huizen Plan* takes as its object the Royal Palace on Dam Square. In a jab at the monarchy, the plan declares that the palace, maintained as the queen’s official residence despite her actually being based in the Hague, the largest vacant house in the city and the “image” of a housing shortage that was being most acutely felt by unmarried young people who fell outside of the priorities of Amsterdam’s heavily



Rob Stolk working in his printing shop



smoke bombing of the royal wedding  
Image from the IISG archive





Witte Huizen Plan flyer from author's collection.

rationed, state-controlled housing system. The plan demands that the palace be made into “*The Kollektieve Klaas Tempel*” (Collective Santa Claus Temple) which seems to have roughly corresponded to the much more earnest, contemporary notion of an “occupied social center”. It also calls for the organization of working groups of young people to learn construction skills by renovating housing for themselves in the city center. Finally the *Witte Huizen Plan* dictates that the doors of vacant houses be painted white and that lists be made of such buildings and distributed by a Provo real estate office to people searching for a place to live and, in the words of the plan, “find New Babylon.”<sup>12</sup> The first elements of the plan were, of course, not within Provo’s power to effect. There were however buildings standing vacant all over Amsterdam as industrial space become less viable and real estate speculators attempted to keep properties out of the state-regulated rental market. Also, an increasing number of young people found themselves living in transient, unconventional circumstances that kept them off waiting lists for apartments and unconsidered by the housing authorities, and a culture of informal squatting transient “crash pads” had developed among the Amsterdam youth. The Provo Real Estate Office would formalize these occupations and load them with political significance. The *Witte Huizen Plan* would also signal the beginning of Provo’s increasing involvement with matters of specific municipal policy and the inclusion of members with more immediate and responsible political goals. Other plans — including the “White Wife Plan” calling for women’s health clinics and progressive sex education for girls, “White Children Plan” that proposed a system of collective child care, and the “White Chickens Plan” demanding that the police, dubbed “blue chickens” in popular slang, be replaced with unarmed social services agents who would dispense medical care, contraceptives and fried chicken — were cheeky but fundamentally affirmative of the developing progressive welfare state.

In the weeks after the white bicycle event, the crowds in Spui Square grew and skirmishes between police and spectators began to erupt with greater frequency and violence. In hopes of diffusing the situation, van Duyn and a group of the other Provos arranged a meeting with the police commander. The talks, however, foundered in the face of an insurmountable cultural divide between the two parties and the inability of the Provo leaders to convince the police that they could actually control the crowds. Instead guards were stationed around the statue in Spui Square, “like,” in Stolk’s words, “it was made out of diamonds and Dr. No or James Bond wanted to steal it,”<sup>13</sup> and anyone who attempted to stage performances around it was arrested. Bizarrely, it was forbidden to write or speak in public the word “image”, which had become the Provo’s malediction applied to monuments and symbols of power they hated. At least one person, Hans Tuynman, was convicted and jailed for it when he staged a performance that involved whispering “image” to spectators. At the summer’s end much of Provo’s explicitly political activity was shifted to another site, the statue of Joannes Benedictus Van Heutsz, known as the “Pacifactor of Aceh” for his role in solidifying the Dutch hold on the East Indies by putting down the Aceh rebellion. Provo resignification efforts were here directed at recasting the colonial hero as a brutal oppressor and tie his image, and Dutch colonialism in general, to the American involvement in Vietnam.

Spui Square remained a site of performance art and happenings and a center for the city’s bohemian street culture while the demonstrations at the van Heutsz monument attracted a wider range of participants. These would include anti-war activists and elements of other traditional political groups as well as a large mass of relatively non-intellectual, restless youth who called themselves Provos despite taking very little direction from the core group of Provo leadership. As 1966 progressed into, 1967 this would have the dual effect of causing Provo to become both increasingly fragmented and increasingly reified as a political movement. Van Duyn assumed a clear leadership role in a political pressure group with its own headquarters and press facilities while Grootveld took on a symbolic role as a flamboyant public figure who spent much of his time, holding court aboard a barge, dubbed the “Provo Boat”, lushly greened with potted marijuana plants. More responsible, politically savvy Provos, especially the handsome and well-spoken Bernard de Vries, rose in importance, or at least prominence, relative to radical troublemakers like Stolk and eccentrics like Grootveld. Meanwhile, “provo” had become a blanket term for a burgeoning countercultural street scene in Amsterdam that was organized less by ideology than by a shared passion for the new, fast-becoming

staples of youth – sex, drugs, rock and roll. Political consciousness for these Provos often did not extend far beyond a longing for a better, freer life than they had known in the small, rapidly suburbanizing towns they had grown up in. Nonetheless, it was they who would fill the streets and swell the ranks of striking workers in a series of running street battles that have come to be called the “Provo Riots”.

Despite being attributed to the Provos, the riots would begin in June of 1967 when a man died during the course of an attempt by the police to break a wildcat strike among dock and construction workers who had walked off their jobs in opposition to contracts, negotiated by their union leaders, that they felt had sold out their interests by accepting reduced benefits. The police initially claimed that the man had not been killed by their action or by a heart attack (as it now appears was the case) but by a fellow worker. This served only to enrage the strikers and incite further strikes and rioting by both workers and elements of the youth counterculture who joined in out of some mixture of solidarity and opportunism. Unlike the previous scuffles with police and sporadic violence at Provo happenings, these riots involved large-scale civil unrest with barricade fighting, hundreds of arrests, and massive use of force by the police. The striking workers attacked the headquarters of their own union, and the youth mobs, more interested in the power of media and affronted by the articles demonizing them, occupied and sacked the offices of *De Telegraaf*. In a move much easier to associate with German tanks and the trauma of the occupation, a mechanized battalion was placed at the ready and stationed in the streets, marking the first time since the war that the Dutch state would threaten to use military force to put down the rebellious citizenry of Amsterdam.

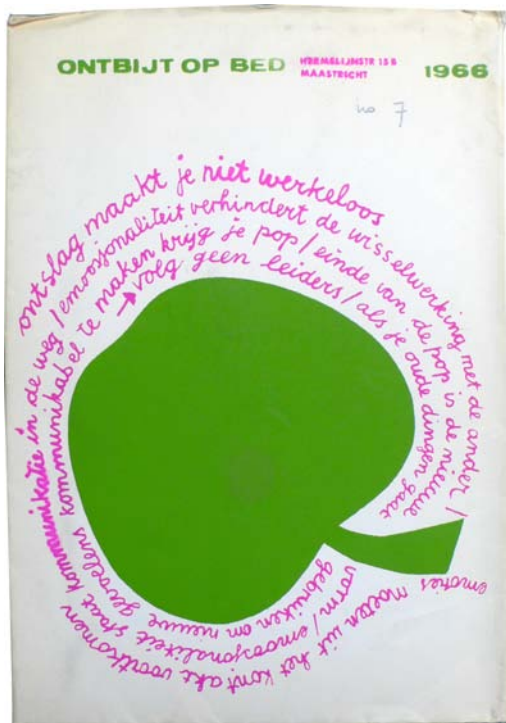
Despite wide participation by their Provotarian comrades, the “official” Provo leadership sought to dissociate themselves from the riots. As the street Provos fought the police to a standstill with a combination of clever Provo game playing and the less nuanced use of paving stones and gasoline bombs,<sup>14</sup> the “official Provos” were faced with a serious dilemma. Encouraging the riots and trying to push them towards a revolutionary situation would mean having to govern the city, control the forces they had set into motion, and address the issues they had brought to the fore in political debate. Most importantly, if the authorities were to capitulate, Provo would lose both its accustomed oppositional position and its all-important adversary to push against. They would be forced to answer seriously the question the papers had been asking in alarm since the riots began: “What do the Provos want?” On the other hand, to call for an end of the violence would be to appear to have been co-opted and to own up to the reformist nature of their project. No definitive statement was issued and, after order was restored, the Provos met with the Mayor to discuss the situation. In the next municipal election de Vries ran at the top of a Provo list and won a seat on the city council. The national government, alarmed by the violence, launched an investigation that eventually led to the resignation of the Mayor of Amsterdam and the replacement of the chief of police. Two years before the Situationists would face the same dilemma in Paris, the Provos had gone from being an anarchist performance art project to becoming an accepted opposition party and social movement studied by Dutch scholars and social scientists.

Debord would devote a section of the SI treatise on youth rebellion, *The Poverty of Student Life*, to a caustic expression of his disappointment with the Provos. He begins by holding up the potential of youthful “delinquents”, asserting that “at the most primitive level, delinquents all over the world express with the most evident violence their refusal be integrated. But the abstractness of their refusal gives them no chance to escape the contradictions of a system of which they are a spontaneous negative product.” Debord goes on to describe the Provos as having potentially found such a path of flight but, at the same time being undone by their inability to transform the very theory that allowed them to replace the abstract refusal of the delinquent with positive forms of abstraction. “The Provos,” Debord continues, “are the first form of suppression of the experience of the delinquents, the organization of its first political expression. They were born out of an encounter between a few dregs from the world of decomposed art in search of a career and a mass of young rebels in search of self-expression. Their organization enabled both sides to advance towards and achieve a new type of contestation. The “artist” contributed a few notions about play, though still quite mystified and decked out in a patchwork of ideological garments; the young rebels



provos deface statue of Joannes Benedictus van Heutsz, photograph by Cor Jaring





The final issue of Maastricht based provo magazine *Ontbijt op Bed* that unfolds into a poster announcing the Provo Council

had nothing to offer but violence and revolt... The masses have found themselves under the tutelage of a small clique of dubious leaders... [whose] neoartistic reformism has prevailed over the possibility that the delinquents' violence might extend itself to the plane of ideas in an attempt to supersede art." Debord decries the "ridiculous ideology of the provotariat (an artistico-political salad thrown together out of the mildewed leftovers of a feast [Provo leaders] have never known" and denounces the opposition of the concept of the provotariat to that of a passive proletariat. He, however, offers little by way of alternative other than a conventionally Marxist conception of the proletariat as "the Motor of Capitalist society and thus its mortal threat" and a call for the Provos to develop a critique of the "production system" and a faith in the revolutionary potential of the workers that will enable them to "link up with the authentic modern contestation of which they are already one of the fledgling expressions. If the Provos want to change the world," Debord asserts, "they have no use for those who are content to paint it white."<sup>15</sup>

It would be easy to dismiss Debord's critique as being unfair and missing the distinctions between the emerging Provo political leaders such as de Vries, Constant (whom Debord seems actually to be writing against), and other "artists" such as Grootveld who, despite their lack of interest in real violence, found most common cause with the "young rebels" and made a virtue of the "decomposed" nature of their artistic practices. The charges of reformism, however, ring true. Also it had indeed become increasingly unacceptable that the Provos could not formulate a clear position on the relation between the structures of "real" material and the symbolic orders of social reproduction that govern the "plane of ideas" on which they hoped to stage their struggle. At least in the minds of the movement's most radical thinkers, it became clear that Provo had reached a point of crisis. The point was made performatively. Stolk and Grootveld took advantage of a moment when van Duyn and De Vries, having become fairly professional politicians, were both out of the city on a speaking tour, to stage a fake "palace coup" and declared that the "Revolutionary Terrorist Council" had taken control of Provo. The statue of van Heutsz was blown up, this time not with the sugar/nitrate smoke bombs used in the attack on the royal wedding but with real explosives. Not realizing that Provo, having become institutionalized, was now itself being provoked, van Duyn fell for the trick and issued a concerned statement on behalf of the Provo leadership, stating that "although they felt sympathy for the cause, they deeply deplored the use of violence." Upon returning to Amsterdam and discovering that the "revolutionary terrorists" were in fact his old friends, van Duyn realized the necessity of Provo's reappraisal.

A conference aimed at deciding the future of the movement was organized in a castle near Maastricht, deep in the catholic south of the still-intensely-provincial Netherlands, in a place that was, at least conceptually, a long way from Amsterdam. The "Provo Council" was organized by a local Provo group that had developed a somewhat idiosyncratic interpretation of the franchise model produced by the Amsterdam Provos. Their magazine, *Ontbijt op Bed* (Breakfast in Bed) eschewed iconic oblong shape of Provo magazines for a square in format and was filled with brightly colored silk screened graphics, literally illustrating that their connection with the French context not with the Situationists but with the more speculative and hopeful Utopie group. A small group of activists from across Western Europe were invited to participate in discussions, and a larger number of journalists, from whom the organizers were able to extract substantial payments for access to the latest Provo scoop, were invited to attend press conferences. As soon as the congress was under way, however, it became increasingly clear that the best way to proceed was to dissolve the movement. According to Hans Mol, one of the leaders of the Maastricht group, this conclusion was cemented when members of an invited German contingent pressed the Provos to escalate their smoke bomb attacks to real bombings and to begin an armed struggle in earnest. To the southern Provos, who had been active in protesting the presence of NATO headquarters in Maastricht and the easy integration of rehabilitated German officers with Nazi pasts into its leadership, the idea of discussing violence, however revolutionary, with Germans, however sympathetic, was intolerable. According to Mol, the German militants, whose names he either does not recall or is unwilling to divulge, later become active in the armed actions of the Red Brigades in the 1970s,<sup>17</sup> which, despite their reliance on real violence, were conceived of largely as symbolic attempts to provoke show of force from the state that would shock a complacent society into revolutionary action. The provos

decided that a commitment to symbolic action was central to their project and that their aims would be best served by symbolically “liquidating” the movement.

Upon the Provo leadership’s return to Amsterdam, a final happening was organized in the Vondelpark, the large green space situated just west of the central canal district that had become a popular camping spot for the crowds of itinerant hippies now flocking to Amsterdam. In what must have seemed something of a passing of the torch, it was announced that Provo would come to an end. The movement and its members would, however, continue to have an influence in defining the terms of urban politics and radical practice up into the present day, although perhaps never again in as original and articulate ways as they did when they were working together to draft their white plans. As Amsterdam became a countercultural Mecca, defined by its (perhaps repressive) tolerance of bohemian deviance, Van Duyn and De Vries both became active in parliamentary politics as members of progressive green parties. Stolk would develop his printing operating into an important resource for the successive waves of activist movements that would follow Provo in making Amsterdam a petri dish for social experimentation and a flash point in the contestation of urban spatial orders into the 1990s. Perhaps more interesting however, is the persistence of provo forms. The Provo Real Estate office first became a viable housing solution for those interested in making a project of playing out new ways of living in the city and then, after being renamed the *Woningburo de Kraker* (Working Office for Housebreakers or Squatter’s Workshop), an important center around which neighborhood occupation movements would coalesce in the 1970s and a practical model for the powerful squatter movement of the 1980s.

In May of 1968 the Situationists would famously find themselves in their own position of trying to maintain their grip on the “plane of ideas” as material events spun out of their control and arriving at a crisis of their own. It does not seem reasonable to state anything so simple as that the Provos succeeded where the Situationists failed. What does seem clear, however, is that if there is any substance to the often-discussed idea of the “failure of ’68”, that it is the failure, or at least the conclusion, of a certain set of modern political forms that were inadequate to the task of remaking the structures of everyday life at that time and under those conditions. The brief arc of the Provo movement, on the other hand, would seem to mark the start – if only a false start, jumping too early from the blocks – of a postmodern political practice. Within the Situationist dismissal of art there would seem to lie an attempt to adhere to Benjamin’s warning against the aestheticization of politics. Pushed to the point of crisis, however (and perhaps under the influence of Debord’s own Stalinist tendencies), this bottoms out into hackneyed, content-based, ideology critique and finally falls back into the very thing it hoped to avoid. Provo tactics of abstraction and radical formal play – however frivolous they may seem initially – actually succeed much more convincingly in inverting the problem and achieving the politicization of aesthetics, or at least an effective engagement with the political implications of aesthetic operations. If Provo is to present a way forward for either art, politics or urbanism, it will be to erase, or at least complicate, the distinction between effecting change in the world of the real and subversively reordering the structures of meaning that give that world its form. If there is a Provo politics it is the politics of painting the world white and of living and working in the white-painted world of the present.



Poster advertising the *Woningburo de Kraker* printed by Rob Stolk.



<sup>1</sup> Schimmelpennink, Luud, *PROVO's Fietsenplan*, July 1966, Amsterdam. Author's translation.

<sup>2</sup> Cherix, Christophe, *In & Out of Amsterdam: Travels in Conceptual Art, 1960-1976*, 2009, MoMA, New York City.

<sup>3</sup> "PROVO//PROVO// PROVO// PROVO// PROVO// PROVO// PROVO// PROVO// PROVO// PROVO"

[Provo Manifesto] English version November 1966, Written by Roel van Duyn, signed by Gabriel Berkhout, Peter Bronkherst, Roel van Duyn, Arnold Emans, Rob de Groot, Fred Fontijn, Jaap Hom, Ron van der Horst, Koosje Koster, Lou van Nimwegen, Luud Schimmelpenninck, Rob Stolk, Hans Tuynman, Bernard de Vries, Irene van der Weetering, Duco van Weerlee.

<sup>4</sup> Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1848

<sup>5</sup> Schimmelpennink, L

<sup>6</sup> COBRA is an acronym standing for "Copenhagen, Brussels, Rotterdam, Amsterdam" – the cities it members came from and where much of its early work was produced and exhibited.

<sup>7</sup> Nic Tummers, organizer of several New Babylon exhibitions, in interview with the author.

<sup>8</sup> Nieuwenhuis, Constant, "New Urbanism", *Provo*, no. 9, 1966. English translation available at: <http://www.notbored.org/new-urbanism.html>

<sup>9</sup> Robert Jasper Grootveld can also be said to be a "street" provo having come from a working class background with a father who was active in an anarchist shipyard workers union and, more significantly, not being engaged in any significant writing obscuring his theoretical positions in his eccentric performance style. Grootveld however assumed the role of a mentor or elder statesman who would not have been classified in either category.

<sup>10</sup> Debord, Guy, "Situationist Thesis on Traffic", *Internationale Situationniste*, no. 3, December, 1959, Paris

<sup>11</sup> Voeten, Teun "Dutch Provos", *High Times*, January 1990

<sup>12</sup> Boersma, Auke, *Het Witte Huizen Plan*, May 1966, Amsterdam, Author's Translation.

<sup>13</sup> Voeten, T.

<sup>14</sup> "Basically the provos have beaten the cops. The riots revealed their complete inability to deal with exuberant, leaderless and intense political street-games: their horses have already been driven off the streets with ball-bearings and marbles, and it is only a matter of time before someone comes up with aniseed or ammonia for the dogs. All the cops can do is keep the crowds moving, disperse groups about to form, book the occasional agitator for the night they are just playing for time, big blue thugs with their fingers stuck in the dyke..." Grey, Christopher, Charles, Radcliffe "The Provo Riots", *Heatwave #2*, October 1966, London

<sup>15</sup> Debord, Guy, "It Is Not Enough For Theory to Seek Its Realization in Practice; Practice Must Seek Its Theory", *On the Poverty of Student Life: Considered in Its Economic, Political, Psychological, Sexual and Especially Intellectual Aspects*, With a modest Proposal for Its Remedy, November 1966.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Voeten, T.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with the author.