

Balancing Acts: a conversation between
Yvette Mutumba and Pieter Paul Pothoven

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Yvette Mutumba: To make a critical work both about and in collaboration with RARA is a balancing act, I guess.

Pieter Paul Pothoven: Yes, it is on many levels, but let me say a few things first about the Revolutionary Anti-Racist Action, the way it went down in history, and how I collaborate with the people that were involved. RARA is a resistance collective that in the 1980s and 1990s fought against racism, oppression and exploitation, the ongoing legacy of Dutch imperialist history. Amongst other targets, they attacked corporations that were financially benefitting from apartheid in South Africa, like Shell and Makro. As the name RARA implies – ‘ra-ra’ means ‘guess ‘ in Dutch – the collective always operated anonymously. In 1988, one person, a man, was trialed and sentenced. Unwillingly he became the face of RARA. As a result, RARA is often seen as a white male collective, but in fact it was composed of males and females, straight and gay, white and non-white, from both working and middle class backgrounds. For a while now, I am working on a series of works that respects the anonymous and collective nature of this collective, and that includes their personal experiences and political perspectives as well. I made contact with RARA quite early in this process, and after a long correspondence we met several times to discuss my plans. They do not only give feedback, but also come up with very interesting ideas of their own. Even though I work in close consultation, there is enough room for discussion and critique from both sides.

YM: Do you see also RARA as a co-author in what you are doing now?

PPP: Not necessarily in the part that I am showing during the exhibition facade suspended, which sheds light on RARA within the framework of a house raid that took place in 1988, as well as within the context of the Dutch colonial past that reaches back to the 17th century. I did discuss my plans beforehand with them though. After this exhibition, I will continue to work on a script for an audio piece about RARA. In this new work, which I hope to finish by the end of 2018, yes, certain persons of RARA will definitely be co-authors.

YM: I never heard about RARA before. Of course, as a German, my first association was with the Rote Armee Fraktion. It was less of a mystery than RARA, because there was this cult around certain people such as Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof. RARA seems to be the opposite, because individual figures were not very much glorified and in the forefront. I have been thinking a lot about this because I always have been wondering: If I were born in that generation, how would I have

behaved? Would I have crossed a certain line? All these bombings, in the Netherlands no one died, but still, it is actually going out there and crossing that line. I was just wondering how you position yourself towards that? Do you support every aspect of it? Are you trying to figure out where you would stand?

PPP: Well, to a large extent, RARA and the RAF share the same anti-imperialist ideology, but their methods are very different. Unlike the RAF, RARA has always been very outspoken against the use of violence against persons. They went to great lengths in their preparations to avoid casualties. During eighteen bombings only one person was temporarily wounded during the first attack, due to an unfortunate mistake. I do not think I could engage with RARA in the way I am doing now if they operated on that level of violence. To address the question, how do I position myself towards this collective? I want to hear what they have to say and to think together about a way to tell their story. From the beginning of the project, I realized that if I would approach them with a preconceived form or opinion, like a lot of journalists and historians have done in the past, this would influence their response to me - if they would respond at all. Most of them have never spoken publicly. On the question, what would I do, if I had this age in the 1980s? Would I have crossed that line? From an early age on I have always studied resistance in the Second World War to get a better understanding of what it requires to resist. I am sure this was partially because I wanted to know what my grandfather, who was active in the armed Dutch resistance, went through, which was a source of a lot suffering within my family. Of course, I asked myself those questions, but I never managed to get close to an honest answer. The levels of anxiety and tensions and pain that those people had to deal with are impossible to imagine, no matter how much you read or see about it. Despite the fact that RARA is set in a radically different context, my personal contact with them gives me a better understanding of what it requires to cross that line and the impact it has on one's life. Nevertheless, those questions will probably remain unanswerable.

YM: You have to be in that moment, I guess. If you work with all these materials it must have been something that came up in trying to understand what they're doing.

PPP: I think a lot can be taken from their political perspective and way of organizing as an anonymous collective. That does not mean that I automatically sympathize with all their actions or that I am glorifying their use of violence, but I want to get beyond the widespread condemnation of their actions, and – no matter how controversial this might be to some people – to listen to what *they* have to say about it. This is an unprecedented case of post-war resistance in the Netherlands, yet little is known about their side of the story. I think it

is important to document this past from their perspective, now that the people of RARA are still alive. But of course, some of their actions make more sense to me and were more successful than others.

YM: Successful? In what ways?

PPP: The most well known example is that RARA forced SHV (Steenkolen Handels Vereniging) to retreat from South Africa. Between 1985 and 1987, RARA burned down four warehouses of the Makro, a supermarket chain that was part of SHV and owned by the Dutch merchant family Fentener-Van Vlissingen, which had economic interests in South Africa during the apartheid regime. After the fourth Makro went up in flames, the insurance company no longer wanted to cover the company, and after the Dutch government refused to financially compensate the damages, SHV had to leave South Africa. So yes, their actions had an impact. The people involved in RARA, though, say they hardly changed anything. They have the feeling they neither set an example, nor had a lasting effect.

YM: That's why I have been thinking a lot about this question. Really, for me, it is still a big question of how effective it is in the end. I do understand where RARA is coming from. I still don't know what it means, though, but RARA seems to be not only about violence.

PPP: Absolutely.

YM: I would like to talk with you about the architectural elements in your project. Could you say something about the house they operated from? Because it plays an important role in the whole set up of your project.

PPP: The starting point of facade suspended is Overtoom 274, an inconspicuous house in Amsterdam that played a pivotal in the story of RARA. Allegedly, multiple actions were prepared here, and a police raid on the premises played a decisive role in the court case against the only RARA suspect on trial. The building stands on the crossroads of so many things, like the intimate vs. the political, the free vs. the incarcerated, the secretive vs. the visible. I have an ambiguous relationship to this house, which became public through the police raid. Even though only one of seven persons was convicted to 11 months in prison – the arrests and house raids were widely perceived as a failure – the police called it a success, for the questionable reason that 'RARA was taken out of anonymity'. On the one hand I use the information, which was provided by the judiciary system, to undo RARA of its anonymity, to shed light on RARA, but on the other hand, I want to respect the anonymous and secretive nature of this collective. So again, this is a balancing act, what do I reveal and what do I not show? Furthermore, there is very little material to find about RARA. Legal documents, secret service reports, some photographs, appearances in various media, and that is basically it. The house, and especially the facade, offers a physical point of departure to tell the largely immaterial story of RARA. The facade does

not only function here as threshold, but also as object with a relevant material history of its own within this particular context. It is made from a quintessential Dutch colonial resource: teak wood. To me, the use of five large 17th and 18th-century VOC-ship chests to rebuild the facade was a conscious choice. These 'colonial suitcases' were produced on Java and India (Cochin) to hold the private property of high ranked VOC-officials, and were shipped via South Africa to the Netherlands, when the officials were repatriated. To me, the cutting up of these colonial remnants remotely echoes the actions of RARA that fought against the imperialist structures resulting from Dutch colonialism. Sometimes people refer to the process of cutting up of these antiques as 'destruction'. I see it differently. If you purposely destroy something, you do not want it to exist anymore. The chests however, will always be an essential part of this work. The facade bears their traces, like keyholes and a VOC-stamp, and as an immaterial layer they co-define the meaning of this work. The chests are still there, but no longer in the shape of fetishized artifacts from a glorified past.

YM: When you talk about putting it into the colonial history context, does this include a colonial present context, considering where the Netherlands is standing today? Is it, for you, also an analogy maybe, or is it maybe even not an analogy, but actually something very real by bringing this together?

PPP: Absolutely. There are a lot of conversations going on right now about the way the Dutch colonial past is historicized. Think of recent debates about renaming street names, and the recent removal of the bust of the colonial ruler and slave trader Johan Maurits in the Mauritshuis in The Hague. It is definitely in this context that I am working with these colonial artifacts. This history is not a closed chapter. It is still very present and out there, and I think it is very important to constantly analyze how colonialism is part of our fabric. How do we look at this past? It tells us who we are and where we are now and going from here.

Yvette Mutumba is a member of the curatorial team of the 10th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art. She is co-founder and editor-in-chief of the art magazine *Contemporary And (C&)*. From 2012 to 2016 she was working as curator at Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt am Main, DE, where she co-curated the major exhibitions *FOREIGN EXCHANGE (or the stories you wouldn't tell a stranger)* (2014–15), *El Hadji Sy: Paintings, Performance, Politics* (2015), and *A Labour of Love* (2015–16, with Gabi Ngcobo). In 2016 she co-curated *Focus: African Perspectives* at The Armory Show, New York, US. Mutumba studied Art History at Freie Universität Berlin, DE, and holds a PhD from Birkbeck, University of London, GB. As author and editor she has published numerous texts and books on contemporary art from African perspectives as well as *Global Art History*. Her most recent publication *I am built inside you*, edited by ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) and C&, was published in April 2017 by Sternberg Press.