

Heterotropics

**Research paper
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Heterotropics is a research and curatorial project initiated by Amsterdam-based curator Sara Giannini. The project investigates the immaterial and material remnants of colonial desire and exotic projection, looking at and performing imagined geographies. Arising from the linguistic intimacy between “trope” and “tropic,” *Heterotropics* is a fictitious concept relating language, space and collective imagery.

Taking the city of Amsterdam as a starting point, the project will facilitate and commission artistic and theoretical interventions in different locations in Amsterdam.

Heterotropics will be launched on the 24th of September 2016 with a multifold event across the Indische Buurt in Amsterdam Oost, including interventions by artists Alex 2000 (NL) & Pauline Curnier Jardin (FR/NL), David Bernstein (US/BE) & Jokūbas Čižikas (LT/NL), and Jacopo Miliani (IT).

Premises

Among the multifaceted engagements with colonial pasts, we can witness a remarkable fascination with the colonial, visibly present since at least the 1990s, but much stronger today with the rise of new nationalisms in many European countries. The widespread phenomenon of colonial nostalgia describes the “apparent desire, visible in the private and the public sphere, expressed by people of different generations or promoted by the consumer industry, for things, styles, and notions associated with the colonial era: from the recycling of colonial postcards to the wealth of movies addressing the colonial past; the rise of grand, colonial hotels to nostalgic colonial travel tours; the return of colonial-design advertisements to colonial furniture at home; and the laments about lost, colonial city quarters to memories of colonial quietness and peace.”

With reference to this kind of fascination, *Heterotropics* wishes to investigate the traces of imperial formations in Amsterdam and question what projections they trigger. The project does not approach the local landscape akin to an ethnographer but rather through figurative and symbolic dimensions of meaning. The different traces will be looked at as prisms refracting the ghostly lights of history also with the aim to propose novel relational modes between art and the public realm that deviate from social-political activism or anthropological analysis. The participating artists and theorists are invited to elaborate or present projects that assume an oblique angle and disentangle the fiction of the real and the reality of fiction; researching and performing the artifices of language and representation.

The project does not postulate a methodological separateness between subject and object, as well between territory and gaze. It meanders and navigates imagined landscapes, or *heterotropics*: an invented notion where the linguistic concept of “trope” merges with the cultural construct of “tropics”. Deriving from the ancient Greek *trepein* (to push, to alter) both trope and tropic imply a shift and a transformation. For linguists, tropes are deviations from conventional language usage towards other unrelated meanings or thoughts. The tropics in turn are a region of the earth situated between imaginary lines where the sun appears to “turn back” at

the solstices. The tropics are where the earth ceases to be its literal self and dematerializes into our imagination. The tropics are a figure of speech which resonates with the Foucauldian notion of heterotopias: impossible co-habitations in the same place of different slices in space and time.

The Netherlands are a privileged case study to probe such a concept: a land without land, a point of departure, home country of the first cartographers, explorers and navigators. This peculiar propulsion towards the unknown epitomizes the desire of an imagined and abundant “other” laying at the core of Western imperialist imagination. As Edward Said pointed out in his study of Orientalism the absence is a necessary trait for the formation of a simulacrum of the other.

If the boat has represented the “greatest reserve of the imagination of European countries since the 16th century”, it is then surely through its boats, that the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC) – allegedly the first multinational in history – nurtured the formation of a collective colonial imagination through the displacement of people, objects and stories.

Because of these movements, colonialism is historically connected to the emergence of nostalgia as a social malady, resulting in an irresistible drive to collect, possess and accumulate. Especially, but not exclusively, after the independence of the colonies, a sense of loss started to pervade the minds of European colonialists producing transitional objects of comfort: palpable and impalpable fetishes, symbols and illusions of the lost or dreamed paradise. *Heterotropics* are therefore psychological environments of the lonely mind, fabricated erotic landscapes, and surrogated objects of desire.

In The Netherlands the colonial past, and specifically the Dutch East Indies, is referred to with the Malay expression *Tempo Doele*. Literally meaning “the old days”, in Dutch it denotes “the good old days” of colonial life. *Tempo Doele* is an imagined historical category – it is a mythical, teleological and heterotropic time, one that was and can never really be experienced, but a time which nevertheless one tends to. In its messianic promise, *Tempo Doele* is however inscribed in the daily life of people in the Netherlands as it informs and gives name to many Indonesian restaurants and shops in the country.

The different chapters of the project will elaborate on different and yet inter-related aspects of *Heterotropics* starting with the quintessential “heterotropic” district in Amsterdam: the Indische Buurt.

Heterotropics#1 | About the Indische Buurt

Heterotropics#1 departs from the semio-and-psycho-geography of the Indische Buurt in Amsterdam Oost, and turns it for the occasion into an escapist stage. The event consists of three different and parallel interventions by artists Alex 2000 & Pauline Curnier Jardin, David Bernstein & Jokūbas Čižikas, and Jacopo Miliani.

Named after the former Dutch colonies in Indonesia, the toponymy of the Indische Buurt (“The Indies Neighborhood”) results in wordings like Balistraat or Javastraat reverberating a sense of longing, nostalgia and colonial appropriation.

Reversely, Indonesian cities during Dutch occupation were re-baptized with Dutch names (“Batavia”) and reshaped according to Dutch urban models as a way to behold a connection and a sense of belonging to the motherland.

What does it mean to live today in such places as the Indische Buurt? How do places inhabit names of other places? How does the history of that name merge with the present of this place?

Through a composite program in private and public spaces of the neighborhood, the first chapter of *Heterotropics* aims to raise such questions in a tension between history and fantasy, considering that issues of citizenship, belonging, race, economic status, and culture are interlacing with and reformulating each other.

These continuous negotiations become extremely palpable when looking at the complex stratification of the Indische Buurt. Created in the early 20th century when the VOC was still operative, it remained a very low-income immigration area until the 2000s. Very recently, young white dwellers have started to reshape the neighborhood with trendy cafés, restaurants and stores often referring to its exotic and colonial background in their names, decors and menus. The Indische Buurt is home to a plurality of cultures and it is believed that an estimated 100 languages are spoken. These several communities add further layers to the semiotics of the neighborhood perceived as an “ethnic outpost” from the rest of the city.

The Indische Buurt is a space of otherness, which is neither here nor there, that is simultaneously physical and mental, a hybrid between geographies and histories mirroring schemes of cultural, political and economic domination. Such a *heterotropic* condition leads to a series of entangled questions concerning the material and immaterial heritage and agency of colonialism in today’s Europe starting from the most pressing one:

How can the colonial keep to be forgotten although it is named and performed?

In recent decades scholars have tried to understand nostalgic feelings relating to the colony, in particular the role that the forgetting of unpleasant or shameful situations plays in these feelings. Renato Rosaldo (1989), who coined the term “imperialist nostalgia”, pointed out that the nostalgic vision of the past transforms “every European into an innocent passer-by”. A vision that seems to be confirmed by Svetlana Boyms when she argues that for nostalgic individuals the “sense of loss does not necessarily suggest that what is lost is properly remembered”.

The toponymy of The Indische Buurt embodies and resonates the colonial imagination once conveyed by the boats of the VOC, the chartered company that fulfilled the project of a Dutch colonial empire overseas. Its names are the remainders of the colonial displacement of objects, animals, specimen and spices.

It is through these lenses that I read the proximity of the Indische Buurt to the most exquisite colonial institutions in Amsterdam Oost such as the Tropen Museum, the Hortus Botanicus and Artis Royal Zoo. All three represent places where the other, in this case the exotic, is reframed, relocated and tamed within the protocols of the motherland. They epitomize the back wave of colonization, its complementary movement of appropriation otherwise referred to as “collecting.”

Collecting is attached to language and memory and can certainly be used as an antidote against the destructiveness of time. Objects collected during colonial times might therefore be seen as transitional or comfort objects, a concept derived from the American psychologist Donald Woods Winnicott. A transitional object enables the child to have a fantasized bond with the mother when she gradually separates from it. Through fantasizing about the object of its wishes the child will find comfort. This

could be a real object like a blanket or a teddy bear, but other non-objects, such as a melody or a word, can fulfill this role as well.

Could we argue that the street names of the Indische Buurt have a transitional function? Can we see them as fetishes of a bygone past that have been collected and displaced to fight against time and keep memory alive?

Looking at the current development of the Indische Buurt we can see how these names have surely a concrete impact on the narratives and trends that are emerging. We can perceive the afterlife of colonial intimacy at the local “Bakker Von Oost”, which appropriated the VOC logo and uses the rose of the wind as its main graphic element, and even more so at “The Walter Woodbury Bar”, a bar dedicated to the British photographer who documented the Dutch colonization of Indonesia. Furbished in pure colonial style, it serves “ethnic food” and shows images by Woodbury whose originals belong to the collection of the Tropen Museum. The list goes on to include the brand new “Bar Botanique | Café Tropique”, a fake greenhouse officially inspired to the lobby of a colonial hotel in the Caribbean and which clearly refers to the Tropen Museum or the Botanical Garden in its name. To conclude the short excursus, it is worth mentioning that the most successful local entrepreneurs who own, among many others places in the area “Bar Botanique | Café Tropique”, call themselves “The Three Wise Men From the East”, evoking yet another enduring orientalist archetype.

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