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BAK AS A SPACE FOR ART AND THINKING  
Policy Document 2009-2012

BAK, basis voor actuele kunst is *a space dedicated to thinking from, about, and through art.*

## INTRODUCTION

This policy document discusses the profile, activities, position, and trajectory of the future development of BAK, basis voor actuele kunst in Utrecht, one of the key institutions in the basis infrastructure in the field of the visual arts in the Netherlands. It argues how BAK developed distinct ways of:

- working locally as well as in the national and international contexts;
- creating a new balance between exhibition-making, research, discussion, production of knowledge, and education;
- connecting to critical issues both within artistic practice and theory as well as in the society;
- investing itself equally in production and presentation;
- working with the public by means of participation;
- and connecting to other practitioners and institutions in the Netherlands and abroad, both in the sector of visual arts and other fields.

In the brief history of its existence BAK became a leading art institute capable of addressing critical issues and themes in and through art ahead of its time and in ways that to a great extent influence institutional practice for the visual art field at home and abroad. By articulating the content and practices of BAK, it is the intention of this policy document to make clear that securing this position and assuring further development of BAK is only possible with a significant increase of the available means (personnel, material, and financial).

BAK invests itself in the exploration and empowerment of two vital relationships: the link between *art and the public sphere*, and the alliance between *artistic practice and theory*. In this respect, BAK initiates research on diverse subjects of urgency in society that are key to the pursuit of these crucial relationships in art, and together with artists and other cultural practitioners realizes projects such as exhibitions, lectures, education, publications, and productions of new work. BAK's examination of the possibilities of art in today's world is a long-term continuous critical engagement, which is both globally informed and locally committed.

*BAK opened* on 17 May 2003 as the result of the conceptual and practical transformation of its predecessor, the artists' initiative Begane Grond. In 2000, Stichting Utrechtse Beeldende Kunst (Stichting Utrechtse Beeldende Kunst has existed since 1989. It ran a project space under the name Begane Grond from 1994 till 2000 on the same premises that are now home to BAK) appointed artistic and executive directors, Maria Hlavajova and Arjan van Meeuwen respectively, with an ambition to infuse its activities with new energy and vision. Under their direction, the institution undertook the task of rethinking itself and embarked on a process of reorientation in search of the ideal contemporary art institute.

BAK could be said to be an embodiment of such a trajectory of continuous questioning of the conditions and

parameters for a space dedicated to art, and as such, an experimental response to a number of questions that marked this endeavor: Why call a new institution to life, and specifically why in the Netherlands, with its field of art oversaturated with institutions? How can one conceive of an art institution that recognizes the profound international–global even–condition in which we work, and at the same time deals with the issues that appeal to and are relevant for the people in Utrecht and in the Netherlands? How can one activate the potential of the city of Utrecht vis-à-vis cultural players such as Amsterdam and Rotterdam, not to mention Berlin, Istanbul, or Hong Kong? How can an art institution operate beyond the capitalist imperatives of the cultural industry, entertainment, spectacle, and quantitative visitorship today? How can we imagine an institution that would not be just an empty vessel waiting to be filled with unrelated exhibitions and objects, but rather a body that seriously engages in thinking together with artists and cultural producers, and which speaks only when it has something to say? Can artistic practice(s) and the discourse around it be recognized as equals and dealt with as such? How might we rearticulate the notion of the art institution’s power into one of responsibility? What are the possibilities at our disposal for responding to the urgencies of our times? In short, what is to be done?

BAK is our answer to these questions, exemplified by practices of *participation*, *discursivity*, *production*, *flexibility*, *fluidity*, and *criticality*. It is envisioned not as a number of strictly defined contents or projects, but rather as a way of acting and thinking, not as the discovery or realization of something

pre-given, but a process and a development, a continuous activation of the possibility of art. In this process, which we have called “becoming oneself,” BAK has become *a basis*; a base, an understructure, a principal constituent, a fundamental support, and a foundation on which artistic practice and discourse activities can rest and develop further.

## BAK’S PROJECTS

Although envisioned as a process of constant change and renewal in search of an ideal space for art, a number of characteristics distinguish BAK as a distinct institution on the local, national, and international levels.

The projects that BAK realizes in most cases consist of number of facets–episodes or parts–so that the subject of examination can be looked at from different angles, at a varied pace, with a diversity of required intensities and concentration, and through divergent formats. These are typically long-term projects, involving a phase of research, reading groups, and collective learning that infuses the project with knowledge and impulses on key issues from a number of artists, curators, theorists from various fields, and different cultural practitioners. Characteristically, most of these long-term, *multifaceted projects* include exhibitions, and although exhibitions are crucial vehicles for us to communicate knowledge and provide a space for imagining and thinking, they are not held in a position of first importance over other types of activity at BAK. BAK places equal emphasis on activities such as *lecture series*, *conversations*, *teaching modules*, and *publications*. Usually they either belong

to the facets of BAK's projects, or, if the character of a project so requires, stand on their own. This is analogous to the fact that BAK does not engage in collaborations exclusively with artists, but rather with a wide array of (international) *practitioners in the field of artistic and intellectual practice*. This approach results in a respective distribution of BAK's resources and influences the ways in which the space, schedules, networks, as well as the intellectual, organizational, and financial means of BAK are apportioned. [See for example the project *Concerning War* (2005-2006), which consisted of a large-scale international exhibition at BAK and in public spaces in Utrecht, a series of conversations and lectures, and a critical reader; and *Citizens and Subjects*, a three-part project which was the Dutch contribution to the Venice Biennale 2007 organized by BAK, consisting of a large-scale production by Aernout Mik in the Dutch Pavilion in Venice, a critical reader, and a series of lectures, seminars, as well as a master course at Utrecht University.]

When we choose the format of a *solo exhibition* besides the large-scale multifaceted projects, it is in order to provide an artist with the opportunity to seriously engage in exploring the possibilities of his or her work—including the realization of new, significant artistic *production*—in ways that would not be readily thinkable in other contexts. BAK then invests all its intellectual and organizational capacity to support the artist in experimenting with his or her practice. BAK wants to challenge artists, notwithstanding which generation they belong to or what their status within the field is (the quality and potential of the artist's work is what guides our

selection) to step over the predictability and repetition of successful formulae, and encourage them to explore other directions. To the extent possible, BAK strives to eliminate external obstacles for concentrated work, and to shield the artist, however temporarily, from the fast pace and existential burdens that this profession otherwise requires, and provide time, space, and the necessary funds to invest all his or her attention into the development of the work. We cannot avoid mentioning here that BAK finds it critically important to engage in rethinking the conditions under which artists and other cultural practitioners labor, and that these individuals need to be ethically compensated for their time and work. [See for example solo exhibitions that involved significant new productions: Aernout Mik: *Raw Footage/Scapegoats* (2006); Haegue Yang: *Unevenly* (2006); Kutluğ Ataman: *Küba/Paradise* (2007); and *Citizens and Subjects: Aernout Mik*, Dutch Contribution to the Venice Biennale (2007).]

Also dedicated to thinking, concentration, and ongoing study, as well as to the exploration of how to create circumstances for such an ideal, is the *Research-In-Residence* (RIR) program, committed to offering a possibility for international artists, writers, curators, and critics to spend a period of time living and working in the city of Utrecht in order to further develop their artistic and theoretical work. In a sort of an open source relationship based on trust and akin to understanding the possibilities of art, the residents are active in lectures, screenings, workshops, etc. and contribute to a community that is "internationally local" with immense potential for infusing the environment in the city and the Netherlands with new ideas, concepts, and energy.

The *themes* and subjects of BAK's projects develop from urgencies both in art and in our society and are aimed at creating a space for artists, writers, curators, scholars, and the public to speak about our contemporary condition and ways of living together. Believing that these subjects concern everybody notwithstanding his or her cultural, political, social, economic, or geographic position, we provide a forum for developing a shared vocabulary through which to think of possible ways to address and challenge the present state of things, while seeing art as an element of empowerment in questioning the prevalent consensus and imagining how things might be otherwise. BAK understands art as a uniquely open field of possibilities inside society, in which imaginative speculation, experimentation, and the articulation of alternatives, proposals, and models of "what might be" takes place. *Art in the expanded sense* (i.e. envisioned beyond the traditional art sphere based on the Enlightenment ideals of display of knowledge, power, spectatorship, and the bourgeois public) is thus the field in which various discourses (aesthetic, cultural, political, social, economic, and other) intersect and exchange. Imagination and speculation, the primary attributes of art, are our tools to negotiate the terrain of the public sphere by means of engaging with concerns of ethical and political consequence.

The *public sphere* could be ideally imagined as an empty space welcoming everybody willing to engage in (non-violent) articulating, negotiating, and distributing the meaning of coexistence. In reality, this space is barricaded by economic and political voices. In this context, BAK seeks ways to become emancipated from these market- and political

dependencies through its projects. In its very ideal, BAK tirelessly works to become a forum in which self-expression by artists and cultural practitioners can be inserted into society, become a public voice proposing diverse agendas for public discussion.

Located in Utrecht, a city both geographically and mentally slightly off the major axis of cultural sightseeing, entertainment, and the concept of art as leisure, there is, we believe, additional room to claim for BAK in tune with its aspiration to invest in the generation and transfer of knowledge about and via art. Above all, Utrecht is a city home to a major university and art academy and therefore we think of the possibility for the "slow," concentrated, and in-depth mode of working of an art institution in parallel with the advantages of higher *education*. BAK has undertaken the task of developing an enduring relationship with Utrecht University, and namely with its Centre for the Humanities. For its key research-oriented projects, BAK has begun developing education and teaching modules and graduate courses together with Utrecht University to search for points of intersection and empowerment between artistic and academic research, and co-develop projects (mainly series of lectures and publications) as collaborative efforts reaching towards cultural and academic publics across various disciplines and fields.

The notion of the *publicness* BAK invests itself in must not be confused with the question of visitorship or audience. To stress the distinction, early on BAK adopted a "zero visitors" policy (which does not mean zero public), aimed at suggesting in an outspoken way the irrelevance of the quantitative managerial

requirement of a number of visitors for the type of work and engagement of BAK. Instead, BAK developed a complex way of working with the public on several levels. Our first public, so to speak, consists of cultural practitioners involved with and participating in the development and realization of the projects at BAK. As mentioned before, BAK's projects are developed as a collective practice through long research trajectories with artists, writers, curators, theorists, etc. The second public is constituted by people attending exhibitions and discourse activities organized by BAK. The more (physically and geographically) remote third public consists of those people with whom BAK communicates through its publications, including newsletters and handbooks (instead of invitation cards or other marketing instruments, BAK publishes small booklets containing a significant body of knowledge on issues at the center of each project, which are distributed free of charge to a wide range of recipients internationally), critical readers (instead of catalogs for exhibitions, BAK publishes readers as platforms for parallel explorations of particular ideas through a series of texts by artists and theorists), and our web site (which includes a well-visited video archive of all BAK's lectures, conferences, conversations, and panel discussions, as well as background references such as recommended reading lists on the issues BAK engages with, and other research information). The fourth public is formed through the discourse that evolves internationally around BAK itself through reviews and analyses of its projects and institutional approach. One can argue, of course, about the different sensitivities and receptiveness of remote publics and BAK's local

constituency, but for the type of work BAK engages in, the notion of access to ideas and knowledge articulated through its activities is of much greater importance than the body count at the physical threshold of BAK's premises.

## BAK'S POSITION

Despite its relatively brief history, BAK has achieved a *unique position* as an art institution on local, national, and international levels. In implicit and explicit ways, BAK's practice has come to influence the contents, modes of working, and the institutional terrain for the field of contemporary art. In the discourse around art institutions, BAK is regularly quoted amongst most progressive and critical art institutes capable of instigating change across the field of contemporary art. Yet it strives to use this accomplishment as a means to invest back into the field by encouraging collaboration, collegiality, and solidarity with other art and cultural institutions.

In this context BAK has initiated informal collaboration among visual art institutions in *Utrecht* under the name BKNU and regularly contributes a decisive voice to discussions about the cultural field in the city as such, as well as in connection to the ambition of the town to become the Cultural Capital in 2018.

Utrecht University, and namely its Centre for the Humanities, are BAK's key partners for future development in sync with BAK's concept of art intervening in fields other than the traditional art field, touching upon such areas as philosophy, sociology, social science, political theory, and so on and rethinking the distinction between

“theory” and “artistic practice” not as separate but rather mutually reciprocal. Besides a partnership on the level of content and projects, BAK shares with Utrecht University the aspiration of local commitment (Utrecht), national significance (the Netherlands), as well as conceptual consequence and relevance in the international and global context.

*In the Netherlands*, together with de Appel in Amsterdam and Witte de With in Rotterdam, BAK belongs to the triad of the key contemporary art centers, and as such actively engages in discussion with them on issues of common interest in public, exchanges information, and collaborates on an effective and visible scale. In concrete terms and in this vein of thinking, BAK, Witte de With, and de Appel have developed plans for joining forces for international marketing and communication and have outlined a visiting program for art critics. BAK is also regularly collaborating with the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, a museum dedicated in many respects to the empowerment of the public sphere through art with an approach similar to BAK.

With the aim to invest into the “Eurocore” as the larger area in which BAK is located, together with Van Abbemuseum and MUHKA in Antwerp, BAK initiated the Comité van Roosendaal, a regional network of individuals associated with visual arts organizations spanning the territory of Benelux and the Land-Nordrhein-Westfalen. Comité van Roosendaal intends to be a site of lasting collegial exchange where questions, interests, and aspirations are shared concerning the progressive role of cultural institutions in the public domain. To date it consists of participants from ten leading

institutions in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany.

*Internationally*, BAK regularly collaborates with other partner institutions in co-developing or co-producing projects in order to inject another level of significance to the work by reaching new publics and creating new networks. [...]\*

## LOOKING FORWARD

The future of BAK will develop around five key propositions: inquiry, imagination, collectivity, commitment, and continuity.

By *inquiry* we mean bringing the world, including the art world and ourselves, under permanent scrutiny, making it a subject of our study and exploration. This involves continuous articulating and disclosing what the prevailing consensus about the state of things is, as well as tireless efforts to call this consensus into question. However, no oppositional voice is relevant without acknowledging that we ourselves are part of the condition we critically engage with, and thus BAK will continue striving to provide circumstances in which the constructive, speculative possibilities of art can find their place by activating *imagination* and suggesting other visions and possibilities about how things might become. *Collectivity* suggests both our way of developing projects at BAK through shared, participatory undertakings as well as the principle, root condition for the existence of a democratic public sphere. BAK extends enduring *commitment* to this task through a willingness to bind itself intellectually and organizationally to the pursuit and course of the

direction it embarked upon since its inception.

The endeavors of BAK are underlined by one main principle: *continuity*. BAK avoids cheap answers to the demands of today's democratic capitalism such as innovation, trends, the cult of youth, short-term excitement, feeding the market, superficiality, quantity, entertainment, and spectacle. Instead, it practices long-term, enduring engagement with artistic and intellectual labor. In fact, BAK ultimately engages with the one and only question that needs to be explored in-depth—albeit through many angles, attitudes, projects, practices and debates—that is our relationship to the world we live in and imagining what else could be made possible.

In this vein of thinking, in the period 2009-2012 BAK will continue developing projects in a way not dissimilar to how its work has evolved thus far. BAK's activities and their formats derive from the content and react to present urgencies; therefore there is no strict scheme such as an annual program to present. Keeping in mind the flexibility that is essential to the way BAK operates in determining what kind of projects will take place in this period, one can imagine approximately the following:

One to two solo exhibitions per year involving significant new production of works of art. These exhibitions are on view for up to three months, in order to allow for related educational activities in collaboration with art academies and universities to evolve and for discourse to deepen the understanding of the work within the public. We follow the development and practices of diverse

group of artists such as [...] with whom we are exploring the possibility of collaboration in the near future.

Further, a long-term, multifaceted project takes place within such a yearly program, consisting of a research trajectory of a key subject at play in both contemporary art and contemporary society in collaboration with the University including a large-scale exhibition at BAK and in public spaces in Utrecht, a series of public lectures, conversations, workshops, and a critical reader elaborating on the significant analysis and production of knowledge of the subject at hand through artistic and intellectual contributions. This involves the active and participatory commitment of an immense number of cultural practitioners who develop the project as a collective endeavor, for which BAK offers itself as both an organizational basis and an articulate intellectual framework. In the past, BAK focused on subjects such as immigration, war as a new organizing principle in the society, etc. The themes BAK will explore in depth in the future include: the return of religion to the public sphere; the legacy of the year 1989 in the West and an examination of what impact the shift of the notion of the "West" had on artistic production; and the culture of protest and opposition and the possibility of its existence in times of global capitalism, in which critique is nothing but a commodity to consume (including an examination of the possibility of artistic, cultural, and political activism in this day and age).

Along with these activities, researchers in residence create a public moment for their research to "surface" and discuss their work with the public/community.

In addition, all relevant publishing activities (booklets, readers, web site) as tools for distributing knowledge and information take place.

Internationally, it is BAK's ambition to develop and inspire projects in other contexts, such as in the case of the Venice Biennale (2007) or the Brussels Biennial (2008). BAK intends to initiate projects from the content perspective by providing theoretical stimuli for large-scale international collaborations with key and avant-garde visual arts institutions and art practitioners abroad, in which BAK functions as a research center guiding a network of partners through multifaceted projects, activating the potentials of different places and different contexts in a consequential, significant way. One example of such an undertaking is the project entitled *Former West*, initiated by BAK. It explores the developments in arts in the West after the fall of Berlin Wall, i.e. in the period between 1989 and 2009. A large-scale, traveling exhibition with key works of Western art from this era by a diverse group of artists [...] will take place in early 2010 in a number of venues, currently being negotiated [...]. The exhibition is preceded by an extensive research project in collaboration with a dense international network of key curators and theorists in the field of contemporary art and philosophy, which will materialize itself in a series of publications and discourse activities.

## CONCLUSION

It is precisely in this line of continuity that BAK envisions itself in the period from 2009-2012. We have dedicated a good portion of this policy paper to articulating BAK's philosophy both in terms of its content and mode of work and suggested where our focus will continue to be. Yet if BAK's achievements encourage us to strongly believe that we have to continue this work, a radical change is absolutely necessary and vital: it is in significantly increasing the volume of funds that need to be made structurally available to BAK in order to stabilize, professionalize, and further support its promising potentials as one of the key constituents of the national basis infrastructure.

For if BAK, in its brief history, realized this impressive and outspoken range of projects, contributed significantly to the discourse about and through art, and achieved such immense recognition on numerous levels, it is only thanks to the strenuous efforts of a few committed individuals both within and outside of the organization of BAK, dedicating themselves to this work beyond the call of duty, testing the boundaries of what is possible, and doing all of this in uncertain conditions. This untenable situation is not realistically sustainable and therefore we find it of utmost importance to overcome the precarious circumstances of BAK's existence.

We envision the future of BAK as a trajectory of intelligent growth. Yet not in the predictable way of expanding its exhibition space and the like, but growth in *depth, concentration, and professionalization*, which certainly

requires securing the basic stable conditions that BAK lacks at this point in time. This includes the possibility of developing projects that benefit from the availability of seed money, in contrast to starting each project from literally zero; the possibility of allocating time and energy to developing ideas instead of solely fundraising to secure the pure existence of the project; the possibility of ensuring minimal standard needs for appropriate exhibition space; the possibility to compensate the artists and other practitioners for their labor; the possibility to work with trained professionals in the office instead of (almost exclusively) interns and volunteers; and the possibility of securing such basics as enough office space (!).

Indeed, BAK's equal consideration of the importance of exhibitions and discourse activities, as mentioned previously, prompts us to search for another accommodation for BAK, with appropriate exhibition premises, and a separate room allocated to education and knowledge production, which would include a resource database built on particular subjects through BAK's projects, available for public use and study. Importantly, the RIR studio/apartments now scattered through the town would also be consolidated under the same roof and housed with other BAK functions in order to allow for, and further encourage, ongoing dialogue, exchange, and inspiration.

A significant increase of structural investments is vital for BAK's further work: for its programming, for proper compensation for artists and other cultural practitioners as well as our own team, and for assuring adequate

conditions for presenting works of art. This is the reason why for the period 2009–2012 BAK requests the amount of [...] from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and a total of [...] from the City Council of Utrecht, as our most important financial partners. BAK finds itself at a decisive moment, at a critical crossroad, and only if we manage to overcome the asymmetry between the volume and depth of our activities on one hand and the circumstances within which we labor on the other, will BAK have the chance to meaningfully move towards its future. If the current political dictum asks for excellence, it should find it here. Let us allow for this vibrant and crucial work to continue and evolve.

Cover image:  
Roman Ondak,  
*The Stray Man*, 2006

*\* Please note that in the publicly accessible version of this policy document, some specific information related to current and future collaborations and projects, as well as to BAK's budget, has been omitted.*

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