

Karl Philips: Parasitic Politics
by Stefaan Vervoort (2014)

In a story by Edme Boursault, a city rat visits a fellow rat living in the countryside. They gather in the house of a tax inspector, feasting on crumbs that have dropped on the carpet from a dinner party. Upon a sudden burst of noise, however, the tax inspector descends into the dining room, and the rats flee. A system of parasitic relationships - between one rat and the other, between the rat and the tax inspector, between the inspector and the produced labor of society - is suspended. The system is interrupted, after which it adapts and reinstates itself. The noise, although thus minimal and without predetermined effect, intervenes in a network of social relations. It is not a sovereign 'thing' as well an entity constituted within or adjacent to other things - similar to the notion of the parasite itself.

The concept of the parasite, French philosopher Michel Serres thus argues, addresses relationship rather than people or objects. The parasite leeches on other organisms; it is small and inconspicuous (for it clings to something bigger); and it is in (semi-)permanent contact to its host. First and foremost, however, it is an operation. Introducing complexity within an existing system, the parasite constitutes a minimal intervention or subtle interference by analysing (the chain of relationships), paralysing (halting the status quo) or catalysing (instigating a chain reaction). The system remains unadapted, is neutralised or transformed, upon which it modifies and stabilises itself. The parasite, Serres writes, 'has a relation to the relation, a tie to the tie; it branches onto the canal. (...) The whole question of the system now is to analyse what a point, a being, and a station are.'³

The young and radical oeuvre of Karl Philips consistently explores the preconditions and outcomes of such parasitism. His work investigates the vestiges of meaning of the parasite in an era of globalised capitalism and worldwide networks - a new world order that has minified us all, and in which dissonant strategies are more and more subjected to pressure. It does so by intervening in existing social, political and economical networks, investigating the network —its constituents, relations and overall structure - from within. Philips's interventions are often straightforward and nearly always innocuous: a system is reorganised from within, its inside only preconditionally turned 'outwards'. The work does not advocate revolution, not even a minimal turnaround. Instead it engages in a soft, intervening form of politics, wherein discreet interventions evolve in scale and throw light on the potentials and modalities of political action itself.

As a parasite both bonds and shuns its host, assimilation forms a first subclass of strategic methods. In the work *Genk-Blankenberge-Genk* (2014), Philips wears a sweater assimilated to the fabric of the train seats of a Belgian coach, so as to travel unnoticed from east to west Belgium. The strategy is obviously poetic - Philips sits uncomfortably as well as slightly awkward in the negative space between two seats -, encouraging one to reflect the paradox of successful parasitic politics. From a political view, indeed, this action succeeds only if the system remains unaffected: if nothing changes and the status quo remains, if thus, the artist is undiscovered, the system is destabilized. A similar ambiguity occurs in *Wedge* (2014). In a series of video clips, Philips's associates pay nightly visits to ATM-machines, mostly located inside the glass interior of a bank. Upon exit, they drop a little wedge, which stops the door from closing behind them and leaves the bank open for anyone to enter. The wedge, thus minimal in size and visibility alike, acts as a parasite upon the relation between public and private, inside and out, abstract capital and real, three-dimensional space. It again instates no predisposed effect (sometimes the door closes; sometimes someone enters; usually nothing happens) but plays on the preconditions and potential of transformation. As such, the work first and foremost prompts the physical border to capital, the wall that hinders us from reading the bank's glass façade as an index of suppressed social relations. This

questioning happens, firstly, by opening the door, and secondly, by inviting in people who otherwise would remain socially and economically oppressed (the homeless, vagabonds, etc.). Indeed, *Wedge* does not thematize the reality or 'back stage' of capital. Much rather, it demonstrates how seemingly transparent institutions - banks, but equally corporate brands, or the government - institute socially suppressed content, and in the same sleight of hand, convey their own ambiguity or opacity.

Philips' s interventions on billboards, like *Sponsorparking* (2009), *Concierge* (2010), *Good, Bad, Ugly* (2012) and *Shed* (2012), may be understood in a similar manner. In each of these works, minimal living environments are installed on the backside of commercial panels, roadside signs and other surfaces usually reserved for commercial announcements, thus taking up an interesting position between architecture and art. On the one hand, these pieces revitalize the insight, developed by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown in the seminal manifesto *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), that billboards are 'decorated sheds'. Billboards give way to social spaces that are hidden behind their iconic forms of communication - which, in Philips's work, is reformulated with a focus on the former rather than the latter. On the other hand, the works reinterpret the oft-explored genre of ad-art that questions the mediatization and corporatization of the public domain. We are reminded, for instance, of Jenny Holzer's *Protect me from what I want* (1982-85) or *Property Created Crime* (1985), Felix Gonzalez Torres' s *Untitled* (1991) or Ken Lum's *Melly Shum Hates her Job* (1990). With these references as a backdrop Philips' s constructions latently speak of the historical intertwining of architectural theory, art history, and the public sphere; yet they especially extrapolate a singular position from such entwinement. They address the billboard once more as a symptom of suppressed social relations - not by way of a critique of representation as in the art of the 1980s and 1990s, but by invoking and staging these relations *behind* those images.

Still, the parasite in Philips's practice does not always stem from the outside. At times, it is negatively embedded in the core of the system. The complex installation *Topsleepers* (2013), first presented at Het Paviljoen in Ghent and later developed for Philips' s solo exhibition *Foreign Legion* at CIAP in Hasselt, displays three casts of sleeping cabinets of long-distance trucks (the work at CIAP also includes six steel crates usually hanging on the underside of a truck). The sleepers are compact resting quarters for (often foreign) truckers, who are subjected to tiring working schedules to keep intact the flows of capitalism. It is telling that, while these topsleepers are prohibited in Western European countries on the cause of serious fire risk, in Eastern Europe, where most flexible labourers originate from, this prohibition does not exist. Here, that is, the parasite is not so much a force of disruption. Much rather, it is testimonial to the way in which the subject - and, more specifically, the body, as an obstacle around which capital can only abstract - is forced into its position. The subject is reduced to a material entity, transformed, as it were, into 'sheer relationship'. Such insight is again double-natured: on the one hand, it addresses the capitalist reduction of the body, while, on the other, it makes explicit just this somatic aspect in the top sleeper. Thus presented as an unruly outcome and a minimalist interruption at once, global capitalism, again, becomes tangible and is opposed in a parasitic way.

ⁱ Michel Serres, *Le Parasite* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1980). Taken from the English translation *The Parasite* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 38-39.