



'Be Realistic. Demand the Impossible'

The Ambiguous Heritage of the Sixties

We will not make the mistake of mythologising the 1960s. Imagination never made it into power; beaches did not emerge in the streets from under the paving stones and something always remained prohibited. But between the late 1950s and mid-1970s Western society and culture undeniably experienced great changes, which also affected the Low Countries.

The first symptoms of protest culture originated in the 1950s. The most frenzied events took place at the end of the 1960s and the far-reaching consequences of their various changes became clear in the 1970s.

Power and authority, at least the traditional forms of authority (that of government, educators, teachers and the churches) sustained serious damage. Young people freed themselves from all kinds of shackles. Fear was gradually removed from sexuality. People experimented with new social customs, new forms of society. Narcotics were still seen as expanding the mind. Women slowly but surely became emancipated, gaining awareness of their own bodies and rights. Music was the expression of a personal world, raising its middle finger at anything seen as bourgeois. The times smelt of romance, of the grand gesture, of frivolous activism. Self-expression became an aim in itself. The sky was the limit. The impossible became reality, or at least had the potential to do so.

But perhaps this is mythologising by the back door.

After years of rebuilding following World War II, at the start of the 1960s prosperity had arrived. Consumption was definitively on the up. It was that prosperity and optimism which made much of the above possible.

What remains of all that in the Low Countries half a century on? Let me quote just two sentences from the answers you will find in the following pages: 'There was plenty of narcissism and ego-tripping in the "Golden Sixties", but this period also introduced a feeling of solidarity from which twenty-first-century advocates of a new sense of community still have a great deal to learn,' (Geert Buelens); and, 'There is no need for more flexibility, discontinuity and extravagance; there is, however, a need for non-paternalist forms of authority, based on a deep, confidence-inspiring knowledge of affairs and the power to delegate them to others' (Cyrille Offermans).

In this book, we discuss student uprisings in Amsterdam in 1969 and 2015, and Boudewijn de Groot, iconic singer-songwriter of the Low Countries who is still singing today. We discuss the sexual revolution and the price revolution always entails. We ask what the happenings of pop art have to tell us now, and investigate the extent of secularisation in the Low Countries in the last half century and to what degree today's sharing economy is indebted to initiatives and practices which emerged in those years. We close the theme with a refined literary anthology: Harry Mulisch as fellow traveller of Provo, an ode to erotic vitalism (which now sounds sexist and neo-colonialist to some) and the positioning of a poet who was a committed outsider in the 1960s.

*We were not a poetic theme by Mao.
We thought, we'll make our own poem.
We thought, we'll make history here
On the sly.
(Leonard Nolens)*