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### The Polyphonic Object. Geography

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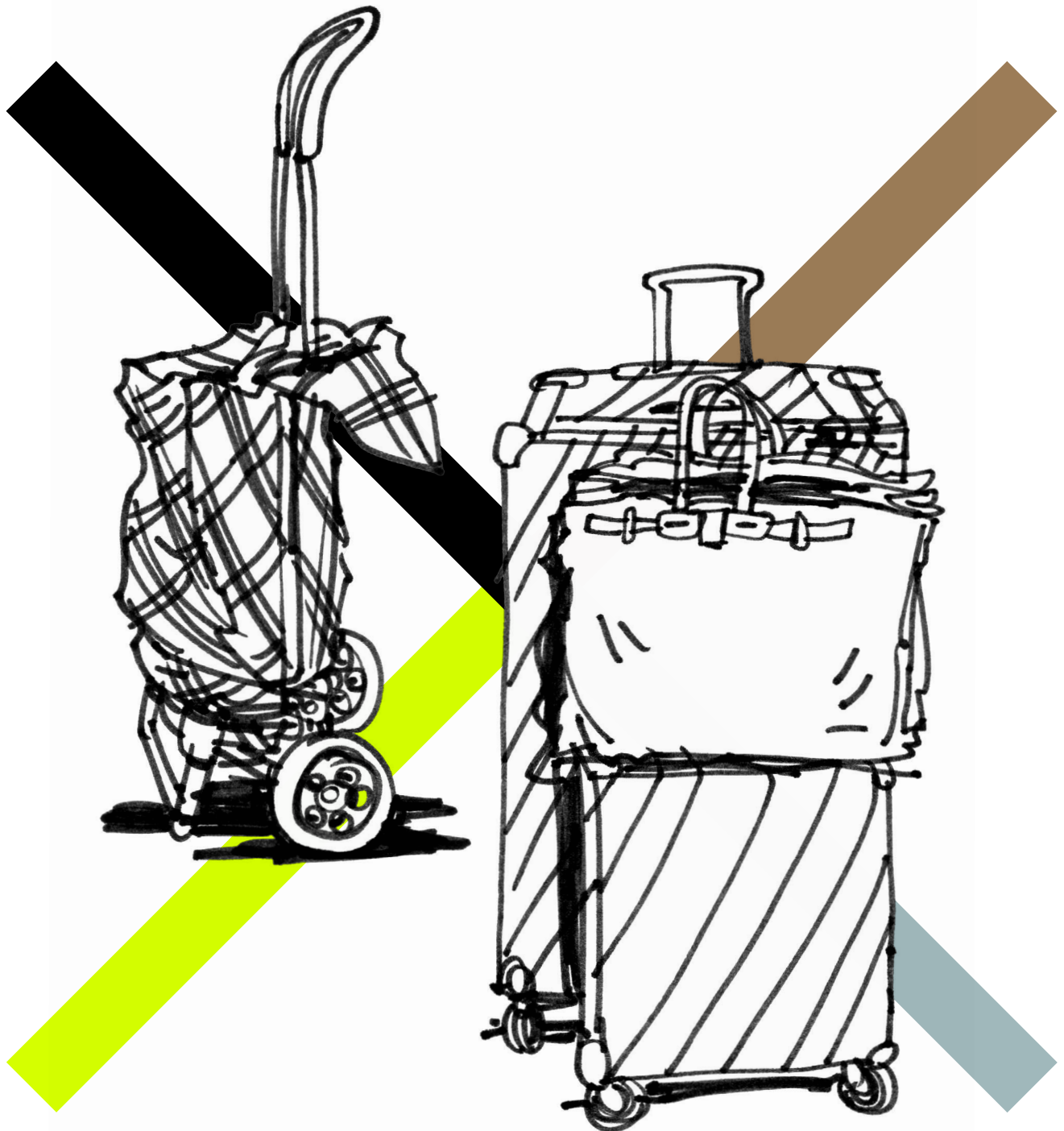
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# The Polyphonic Object



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History

Historian of architecture and urban planning. He is specialized in the urban history of Amsterdam, and interested, amongst other things, in the relationship between political movements and urban design.

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## Wouter van Gent

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Geographer and associate professor at the Universiteit van Amsterdam. Last year, he published his book 'Making the Middle-class City' with Willem Boterman on the gentrification of Amsterdam between the 1980s and 2010s.

# Een Genrestuk

Amsterdam Museum Journal

In 'The Polyphonic Object' four analyses by scholars from different perspectives and academic fields show the layers of complexity a single object can hold. Through their (historical, museum studies, urban geographical, and argumentation/rhetorical) reconstructions, they uncover the different stories behind the painting *Genrestuk* [translation: 'A *Genre Piece*'] by Albert Blitz (1975) (Stichting Genootschap Amsterdam Museum, 1985). The painting was made in response to the 'Nieuwmarkt riots'.

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# Wouter van Gent (geographer)



Two fancy men sit at a dinner table, grabbing their utensils and getting ready to eat. The well-dressed bald man sits straight up and looks at us warily. The other man sags in his seat, tieless and belly out. He leers hungrily as he stirs the soup. Their banquet reminds us of a still life of affluence and vanitas. Behind them, the city is burning. We see a third figure, a nurse. She notices the fire and seems to rush over to the window to close the curtains so

as not to disturb these important men. Maybe she cares for them.

Albert Blitz's *Een Genrestuk* [translation: 'a genre piece'] is a throwback to the golden age of Dutch painting, when Amsterdam's canals marked a centre of trade and power, and talented artists would create their art not for kings or churches but for a burgher society of merchants and statesmen. These affluent individuals commissioned genre art to capture



a fraction of the everyday, often tinged with a hint of morality. Blitz did not paint his work for a bourgeois patron, but the piece was painted and auctioned off to support the *Nieuwmarkt* neighbourhood activist committee in the early spring of 1975 (Oehlen 2015).

At the time, Amsterdam was on fire, politically and socially. Like many cities in North America and Western Europe, the 1970s were a period of 'urban crisis'. As hard as it may seem today, cities were losing population to brand-new suburbs, manufacturing industries were struggling, and municipalities were scrambling for solutions to keep the city relevant. The municipality tried to turn the tide by transforming the city centre and the working-class neighbourhoods around it. Prewar housing was being destroyed to make way for modernist office buildings, infrastructure and roomy rental housing for families. The *Nieuwmarkt* neighbourhood in the city centre was planned for renewal. A broad new highway and a subway line were meant to improve connections, and to open up the poorer margins of the historic city centre for redevelopment (De Liagre Böhl 2010).

Yet, the plans proved to be a bridge too far. Residents, together with young activists and squatters, revolted against the demolishing. Amsterdam faced a housing shortage, particularly for young households flocking to the city. Why not build new housing for these new households instead of families? Riots broke out on March 24 and April 8. The 'battle for *Nieuwmarkt*' was fought with rocks and parking meters against water cannons and nightsticks. The residents barricaded streets, fortified buildings, built air bridges and set up their own communications. The violence shocked the country. Ultimately, the subway was built, but the highway was not. Also, no new metro line would be built for thirty years, and fitting social housing was constructed on top of the new metro tubes.

The subtitle of *Een Genrestuk* translates as "Mayor Dr. I. Samkalden and Alderman Han Lammers, dining against a backdrop of a burning *Nieuwmarkt* neighbourhood". It is a damning statement for these two Social Democrats who thought they were doing the right thing to save the city from squalor and gridlock. These two local leaders are small-time Nero's, unconcerned while their city burns. The work was auctioned two days before the riots broke out (Oehlen 2015), so the burning city represents the political tension that had been building up, the fiery sense of resistance and a spectre of things to come.

The *Nieuwmarkt* riots occurred during what has been labelled the 'twenty-year urban war', a period of social upheaval, protests, and disturbances that started with Provo in 1965 (Mamadouh 1992). The 1980s would see more violence between squatters and police. Yet, the social tensions would lead to a new direction in urban and housing policy in the late 1970s. Urban development would be aimed at housing residents and young newcomers in affordable and decent social rental housing (De Liagre Böhl 2010). After the dust settled in the early 1990s, the war was over, and Amsterdam had turned a new corner but was also on its way to become a middle-class city.

The young demonstrators and activists who were fighting the police and engaged in squatting, had grown up to become the 'new urban middle class'. As their bellies grew, it was their turn to sit at the table. They were now advocating for more ownership housing so they could stay in the city. Later, new policy ideas dictated that housing policies should aim to accommodate knowledge workers and creatives. Gentrification was already a policy in the 1980s to accommodate galleries, squatted housing and bars and restaurants in the historic centre. In the 2000s, the entire prewar city had to be gentrified. Amsterdam

policymakers argued that there was too much affordable housing and that ‘we’ should make this city more attractive for the middle class. Some planners even pointed to maps of housing prices and argued that raising prices everywhere means expanding the city. Also, the waiting lists for social rental apartments were getting a bit long. Ownership allowed the middle classes to jump the queue. Many of the sold apartments would fall into the hands of landlords who are now charging astronomic rents for the former social rental units. Gentrification became the state of things in Amsterdam (Boterman and Van Gent 2023).

Samkalden and Lammers failed to recognise that the city’s demographics were already changing, and businesses were more interested in setting up their offices at the urban edge, near the ring road and suburbs. As such, they could not see what was ahead. Similarly, *Een Genrestuk*, the events in the Nieuwmarkt area and what followed also seem to be from a foreign city today. After a short period of radical city governance, the city has been gentrified after forty years. How would a genre piece look today? As the city’s elders are dining, you would not see a fire in the background, but middle-class and upper-class people on busy terraces, sharing the wine and toasting their comfort. The nurse probably lives in Purmerend if she is lucky.<sup>1</sup>

#### References

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- Mamadouh, V. *De stad in eigen hand : provo's, kabouters en krakers als stedelijke sociale beweging*. Proefschrift, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1992.
- Oehlen, F. "Nieuwmarktrevolte 1975". *Amsterdam Museum*, [hart.amsterdam/nl/page/51860](http://hart.amsterdam/nl/page/51860), 2015.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Pumerend is a small town just outside of Amsterdam, over the past decades a great deal of the population of Amsterdam was forced to move to places like Purmerend because they could not afford to live in the capital anymore.