Provo Station
An installation by Experimental Jetset
GfZK Leipzig, 2016

Introduction

In short, Provo was an Amsterdam anarchist movement that existed for just two years (1965–1967), although its existence resonated for years to come, in the Netherlands and abroad.
Through printed matter, conceptual activism and speculative political proposals (e.g., the 'White Plans'), the Provo movement captured the imagination of a generation, and forever shaped the Dutch political and cultural landscape.
Part art movement and part political party, Provo was a loose collective, consisting of individuals with very different ambitions: subversive agendas, artistic motives, utopian ideas, concrete plans. Between 1965 and 1967, these motives and agendas briefly overlapped, and created a unique movement.
A movement that liquidated itself in 1967, in a self-declared act of 'auto-provocation'.

Looking at the strategies and methods of Provo, we are reminded of a quote by Baudrillard, from 'Utopia Deferred' (Semiotexte, 2006):

"Walls and words, silk-screen posters and hand-printed flyers, were the true revolutionary media in May 1968. The streets where speech started and was exchanged: everything that is an immediate inscription, given and exchanged. Speech and response, moving in the same time and in the same place, reciprocal and antagonistic".

Obviously, Baudrillard is talking here about the Parisian insurrection of 1968 – while Provo took place three years earlier. But still, we think this particular quote could also be used perfectly to describe the working methods of Provo.

At the heart of Provo is exactly the notion of the streets as a place of immediate "speech and response". Magazines were distributed in the streets, posters were pasted to the walls, performances ('happenings') took place on public squares (and around specific statues and monuments), surreal slogans were being chanted (such as a repeated mantra of "ugh, ugh, ugh"), and pamphlets were handed out to unsuspecting bystanders. In the meantime, the (illegal) printing press of Provo had to be moved constantly, from one location to another, because there was always the danger of confiscation.
So the printing press itself was on a constant 'dérive' through the city, echoing the way the Provos themselves were drifting through the streets of Amsterdam.
In that sense, we do believe that the story of Provo is mainly one about the symbiotic relationship between the city and the printing press.

In fact, we even think that, in the case of Provo, the city itself became a printing press. Through the distribution of magazines and pamphlets, and through the use of site-specific performances ('happenings' and 'situations'), Provo turned the city into a place where ideas were

enlarged, multiplied and reproduced. In other words, through Provo, the city revealed itself as a device for reproducing ideas – a metaphorical printing press.

To clarify this triangle (between Provo, the city, and the printing press), it might be interesting to take a look at some of the recurring visual motifs, as can be found within the graphic language of the Provo movement:

The sign of the apple

The sign of the apple (also known as the 'gnot sign', the word 'gnot' being a neologism referring to god, gnosis and 'genot') was conceived around 1962, by pre-Provo pioneers Bart Huges and Robert Jasper Grootveld, when they were looking for a sign to symbolize the notion of Amsterdam as 'Magies Sentrum' ('Magikal Senter'). Originally, the sign stood for a whole range of possible meanings: from a third eye to a fetus, from a skull to a butthole. In 1965, when the sign was adopted by the Provo movement, its meaning narrowed down to the idea of the apple as a representation of the map of Amsterdam.

At first sight a drawing of an apple, the sign actually functions as a city plan, in which the circular outline symbolizes the canals, the short stem (or stalk) symbolizes the Amstel river, and the dot symbolizes the Spui (the square where the happenings took place).
Since 1965, the gnot sign became the unofficial logo of the Provo movement, appearing frequently in print and on walls. In a sense, it is the perfect sign for Provo: a psycho-geographical micro-map, grounding the Provo movement firmly in the material surroundings of Amsterdam.

The colour white

A collection of pamphlets and articles published by Provo between 1965 and 1967, the white plans were basically a series of speculative political proposals. Presented as 'white' gestures, these plans functioned as Fluxus-like interventions in the political landscape.

White plans included the White Bicycle Plan, White Chimney Plan, White Wives Plan, White Chicken Plan, White Housing Plan, White Kids Plan, White Victim Plan, White Car Plan, White Sex Plan, White School Plan, White City Plan and White Corpse Plan.

When Provo turned into a political party, many of these white plans were incorporated in the official party program. Although most plans were never realized in the lifetime of Provo, echoes of them can be found in many social and 'green' policies that are nowadays taken for granted.

The White Bike plan, for example, has been the main inspiration behind many of today's 'public bicycle' programs all over the world.

Although there are various (conflicting) stories regarding the meaning of the colour white within Provo, the immediate effect is clear:

the colour white seems to represent a clean slate, a 'tabula rasa', a projection screen on which the desires of a complete generation could be projected.

A good example of such a 'projection screen' can be found in the empty banner that the Provos were carrying with them in a protest march in 1966, when they were demonstrating against a local law that prohibited them to demonstrate.
Although the empty banner can be seen as a ludic provocation against that specific law, it's not hard to also see the banner as an aesthetic and conceptual gesture.

The brick wall pattern

Another recurring motif in the language of Provo is the brick wall pattern. The most clear example of this pattern can be seen in the first few issues of the Provo magazine, which were wrapped in covers made from actual dollhouse wallpaper, with the handwritten word 'Provo' appearing as graffiti on a wall.
This simple graphic trick, of turning the cover of a magazine into a brick wall, is yet another example of the way in which Provo tried to forge a connection between walls and words.

In an early interview, one young Provo is quoted as saying that the brick wall pattern symbolized "the wall everybody will bang their head against, sooner or later" – which is quite a comprehensive, sharp explanation.
However, regarding the use of the pattern within Provo, it seems more fitting to see the brick wall pattern as a gesture emphasizing the notion of the wall as a blank canvas – in other words, as a constructive gesture rather than a fatalistic one.

Smoke signals

Yet another illustration of this idea of 'the city as a printing press' can be found in the strategic use of smoke. As a protest against the marriage of Queen Beatrix and Prince Claus, the Provo movement prepared 'smoke bombs' (technically speaking, these weren't really 'bombs', but non-explosive devices to create smoke screens) that were used during the royal wedding procession on March 10, 1966.

As the Dutch writer Jan Wolkers already pointed out: these smoke bombs should really be seen as "smoke signals, one of the oldest languages in the world".
The way in which the Provo movement used the city as a platform to showcase these smoke signals, to stage this archetypical form of communication, clearly illustrates the idea of the city as a device to produce and reproduce language.

A typology of statues

A clear example of the way Provo occupied the city of Amsterdam can be found in the appropriation (both physically and ritually) of the city's statues.

By staging specific performances (happenings and demonstrations) near these statutes, these public sculptures and monuments (such as Het Lieverdje, the Domela Nieuwenhuis statue, De Dokwerker and the Van Heutsz Monument) were transformed into Provo archetypes (the 'nozem', the anarchist, the worker, the authority, etc.), effectively turning the lay-out of the city into a symbolical, psycho-geographical space.

The mirrored A

Designed in 1966 (by the Provo-affiliated illustrator Bernard 'Willem' Holtrop), the iconic 'Dag van de Anarchie'-poster announces the demonstrations that would take place during the royal wedding procession on March 10 of that year.

The mirrored letter A obviously (and perfectly) symbolizes the notion of anarchy – but it's not hard to see, in the mirrored A, also a reflection of the notion of printing itself. After all, most techniques of printing involve images that are either mirrored, upside-down or negative.
In that sense, this poster also represents the contrarian nature of printing itself: the idea that you need a negative to get something positive.