

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam objects and their stories: 1970–1975

The film entitled *Bezet (Occupied)* and the 100-hour occupation of 1972



[still from the film *Bezet* (1972) by Arie van Genderen for the SRVU. The sign reads: 'for a university council as highest deciding body. Debate!! The base as well' ('base' referring to the founding principles of the VU)]

In the 1970s, universities around the world were faced with an empowered generation of student activists. For example, in 1972 the Main Building of VU Amsterdam experienced a lengthy occupation by students demanding greater democracy. The activists were also critical of the consequences of the university's Christian principles. The documentary [film](#) on the subject has been included in the VU Heritage Collection and offers some insight into the occupation and spirit of the times. The 50th anniversary of this occupation will be celebrated in February 2022 with an event for activists past and present. Former activist and campus occupier Jochum de Graaf looks back.

On Tuesday, 22 February 1972, a few hundred students occupied the administrative wing of the yet-to-be-completed [Main Building](#). The activists were protesting the nomination procedure for new members of the University Council, which – in their view – underrepresented students and required each member to endorse the VU's objectives. The occupation lent a major impulse to the progressive student movement and attracted support from other sections, staff members and the technical administrative staff (Tas). That first evening, I remember the tea ladies pitching in to help serve meals and staff from the Technical Services department helping maintain order, like I was, by going on guard duty. After more than four days of meetings, consultations, negotiations, the threat of police intervention and a compromise involving postponement of the nomination deadline, the occupation was finally called off on Saturday, 26 February. Democratisation and open debate on the university's objectives have been a permanent priority ever since.

The 100-hour occupation, as it eventually became known, marked a turning point in the development of the radical student movement at the VU. The protest was initiated by the [SRVU](#), the 'political union' that had recently been taken over by activists from the *Rode Eenheden* (Red Units) comprised of Marxist students, especially from the social sciences. This notion of a political trade union linking advocacy to the anti-capitalist struggle had been fleshed out by several student councils at the initiative of the [ASVA](#), in the summer of 1971, with the Dutch Communist Party ([CPN](#)) operating in the background; the ideological influence on the Dutch student movement of [Albert Benschop](#), who died in February 2018, and other prominent leaders of the occupation, such as Ton Kee and [Marius Ernsting](#), has always remained somewhat overlooked. In his *Autobiography of a Babyboomer*, [Pim Fortuyn](#), who would later embellish his role as self-appointed chair of the

occupation council, wrote that they had '*stuck it to the ASVA, with their endless stories of the Maagdenhuis occupation*'.

The occupation was followed by a series of other protests, as Peter L. Bak describes in his historical work [Gedonder in de sociale \(Unrest in sociocultural faculty\)](#). '*The Faculty of Sociocultural Sciences proved to be the most revolutionary of all, with extended occupations, endless council meetings and bitter fights over appointments.*' Still, it was also an exciting time. We joined forces with Pharetra and successfully filed an injunction against the Executive Board, which was refusing to let us have an address file for our anniversary issue because we had published an advance copy of Jan Wolkers' *De Walgvoel* (The Dodo).

As time went by, the radical student movement increasingly struggled to balance its commitment to parliamentary procedures with its anti-capitalist struggle. The SRVU later admitted that it had continued the futile struggle against the 1,000 guilder tuition fee for far too long. The VU student movement increasingly aligned itself with the Dutch Communist Party (CPN), and several 100-hour occupiers took up positions in the party. Elli Izeboud, leader of the 'recreation team' that kept up revolutionary spirits during the occupation with all sorts of creative fight songs, would later become the last CPN chairperson.

The presence of revolutionary students at the conservative university led to new clashes and conflicts, especially over VU's objectives. Many VU administrators regarded the rebellious students as stray sheep who were always welcome to return to the fold. This certainly applied to SRVU administrator and CPN member Victor Rutgers, who hailed from a distinguished VU family. Others were more outspoken: Rector Magnificus [I.A. Diepenhorst](#) railed against the idea of CPN members also sitting on the University Council: 'The RSPCA would never appoint someone who hates animals as their official secretary either.'

Looking back on the period, the activists of the early 1970s mainly recall their successful efforts to chip away at the bastion of the VU's 'hypocritical and undemocratic administrative structure'.

Jochum de Graaf studied sociology at VU Amsterdam from 1970 to 1978. Until his retirement in 2018, he worked as project manager at the foundation Stichting Burgerschapskunde, the Institute for Public Policy and Politics, and ProDemos House for Democracy and the Rule of Law, where he was responsible for the StemWijzer (a Dutch voting advice application) from its inception in 1989. He served as one of the students maintaining order during the 100-hour occupation and became the editor of Pharetra, a student magazine shortly after the protests.

For an overview of the stories highlighted in this exhibition, see: [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam objects and their stories | 140 years of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam](#)