

“Wanna Play?” A reflection by Dries Verhoeven

A week ago I had to stop my project “Wanna Play? (Love in times of Grindr)”. A man felt I had infringed on his privacy. Some people were outraged by the project. The angry protests from the Berlin gay-scene eventually made the project impossible. We stopped the project after 5 days. ‘Who’s been shaved must sit still’, I listened to the criticism and retreated for a few days. I would now like to give my reflection on the project, the mistakes I made in the process and of the social landscape in which my work turned out to be impossible.

In 'Wanna play?' (Love in times of Grindr) I question the influence of dating apps on our daily lives. 'Tindr' is the most popular in the heterosexual world, and in the 'homosexual world' there are Grindr, Scruff and comparable apps. I think these developments influence the way we present ourselves and connect to each other, both in a positive as negative sense. My fundamental question with this project was what these developments mean to the way we handle our need for love, intimacy and commitment, in the digital and analogue worlds.

I had envisaged living in a glass room for 15 days and functioning solely in the ‘digital space’. I was in contact with people living in the vicinity via smartphone apps and asked them to visit me to satisfy my non-sexual needs. I used various dating apps and social media for this, most prominently Grindr. The screen of my smartphone and the physical meetings were made visible to the public passing-by. The photographs were shown as negatives; the chat history was visible without showing the nicknames. I wanted to give the public a ‘peek behind the scenes’ of the internet as it was.

This system was apparently not watertight. In any case, the identity of 1 person I was chatting with was not fully protected. I had a really pleasant chat with that man, we joked a lot. I became over confident and a bit careless; I didn’t consider the name of his dog and his position as a drag queen as personal information and I left them on the screen.

Thereby, as he said himself, his identity could be discovered. In the chat I indicated that my living arrangements were "out of the ordinary" and I asked him, "shall I tell you, or shall I keep it as a surprise?" That was an irresponsible question. I placed the responsibility that I have as an artist in his hands. Once he became aware of the situation, he stormed into my residence and started striking me. He destroyed furniture. I have offered this man my apologies. As an artist it was never my intention to harm anyone.

His description of the project led to a storm of criticism, predominantly on social media. I had supposedly enticed men into a trap for my own gains as an artist. I was supposedly homophobic and I received threats. It demonstrates the power of the internet as a medium where we speak out directly, sometimes in a more extreme manner than we would in ‘real-life’ on the street. As I have mentioned, I understand the incomprehension surrounding what has happened, particularly for those who have not seen my project with their own eyes. But I would like to set a few things straight.

The incident was not exemplary of the project. I received 24 people in the glass house, of which 5 were women. On the first two days the project functioned as follows: at the start of the chat I purposely hid the intention of the project, I first spoke of my needs and then asked the other why they were online. I was cautious that no personal information was displayed. I then informed them of the project’s purpose and invited them to visit me. With the exception of that one man, everyone was informed in advance of what they could expect.

While I played a game of chess with them, made pancakes or lay in the same bed, we talked about our experiences with love, intimacy and commitment and the degree to which the internet influences them. They were exceptional meetings and, often, emotional discussions. They showed

me the relevancy of the project for discussing these themes and the potential of apps like Grindr that by many, also by myself, are probably wrongly seen as apps only for a quick hook up.

The question still remains as to whether what I did in those first two days was immoral. There were dozens of men who asked me “top or bottom?”, to whom I said “nice beard”, or “what are you up to today?”, without them knowing that that information was open and exposed for all to see. I used their words to make a phenomenon visible. As many people on the internet have, I had a hidden agenda. During the first two days of the project I considered that it was, although not particularly nice, justified. I considered it comparable with the position of documentary maker for example, who films his subjects in the public space without informing them and later blurs their faces. In the meantime, I think that this was an untenable position. A number of the men lived in the neighbourhood. They saw their own words not in a documentary but right there on the street. The photos were not optimally disguised. People said their friends could recognise them, directly on the street or by converting the photos back in to positives at home using Photoshop. Downloading the app remains a much easier way to discover who the gay in the neighbourhood is, it will cost you 30 seconds. But I cannot 100% exclude that I may have put these men in a potentially dangerous position. Starting the chat with an explanation of the project would have damaged its authenticity but would have been morally correct.

On the third day, after the incident, I immediately told the people I was chatting with about the purpose of the project. With the theatre, we decided to only display information that was completely indistinguishable. We issued a press release about it. On the fourth and fifth days of the project I could only be reached via Facebook. I didn't chat via the dating apps for two days in an attempt to pacify tempers. I entered into conversations with people who had a problem with the project. But those protestors didn't accept the project in any shape or form. They saw discontinuation as the only option. The genie was out of the bottle. And I think, for many, I had lost my credibility.

In the contact I had with a few of them, another feeling crept over me: that this was no longer a protest for protecting privacy, but that there was a deep-rooted desire to make the whole phenomenon invisible. As if I was not allowed to inform the heteronormative outside world of the existence of the online cruising area, which is what Grindr is. I found it striking that 30 years after the call for the visibility of the homosexual community, there was now a protest for its invisibility.

Last month there was an article in the German newspaper “die Zeit” about the prudishness of public life versus the pornification of the internet, two mutually reinforcing movements. It was about the hysteria of seeing bare breasts on the street but, in the meantime, our children are watching Porn tube in their bedrooms. I had to think about that article this week. The feeling became increasingly clear that these two worlds are not supposed to meet. We know there is a parallel world, one we can all see if we press a button on our phones, but showing it in the public space is a step too far.

The last thing I would want is to deny homosexuals the sexual freedom they fought so hard to obtain. I have enjoyed that freedom every day since I came out 18 years ago. I am glad we have the tools enabling us to look for sex, as often and with whoever we want. I questioned the potential of these apps, which influence the daily lives of many homosexuals, to be used as a tool for finding love. I wanted to present the question as a “self-portrait”, initially via the app that I myself used the most, Grindr.

It would be unjustifiable to limit that discussion to the homosexual community. Developments in self-presentation and the changing way in which we connect with each other since the invention of the smartphone are equally valid topics for discussion in the heterosexual world.

And neither can the homosexual community evade that discussion. The fact that in the past, and still to this day in some countries, homosexuals can be threatened for their sexual orientation, may, I believe, not stop us from throwing a critical eye on a phenomenon in that community.

As an artist, I have to position myself between critical reflection and empathy. I want to respect the feelings of others who I involve in my work, but also feel the need to break-through the common consensus. They don't always sit well together. I crossed the line this time, I apologise for that and have learned from it.

Campaigns were set up against the project, in various forms, to help stop or even boycott the HAU. I find that concerning. We live in a country in which our freedom of expression has been fought for just as fiercely as our sexual freedom. I have great admiration for the Hebbel am Ufer theatre. We share the conviction that art also exists to touch on sore spots, and thus the theatre sometimes chooses projects which evoke opposition, irrespective of in which community that occurs. I am extremely grateful for being given the opportunity to ask a question that, in its form, has proved extremely precarious. I hope that a discussion can now start about the substantive implications of the project.

Dries Verhoeven, 10 October 2014