

Dries Verhoeven. Photo: Andrejs Strokins

## Ants Against the Apocalypse

An interview with Dries Verhoeven, Dutch visual artist and theatre maker

 Agnese Čivle  
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This autumn, the 11<sup>th</sup> International New Theatre Festival "Homo Novus" took place in Riga; in celebrating the 20-year anniversary of the festival, focus was put on productions with the theme of growing up while, at the same time, making a return to childhood. "Homo Novus" also made a kind of "return to childhood" possible for one of the festival's foreign guest-directors, Dries Verhoeven (1976). Verhoeven's works were shown in the former textile factory "Boļševička", and the currently silent and empty brick building with large, paned windows reminded the Dutch director of his teenage days, in which he liked to hang out in the abandoned buildings of his own hometown.

Two of Verhoeven's works were shown at "Boļševička": the urban landscape installation *Fare Thee Well!* (2012) in which, when a telescope is turned towards individual urban places, things and absolutes that have been either slated for demolition or have already been torn down, they are given goodbyes; and a film/video-installation made specially for the festival – a documentary film of his large-scale scenography project *Homo Desperatus* (2014), which consisted of 44 scale models of real-world locations filled with human suffering, such as the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant, the Ukrainian parliament in Kiev, a clinic for drug addicts in Germany, and a clothing factory in Bangladesh. Each scale model is inhabited by ants, a much-used metaphor for humans.

Arterritory.com had the opportunity to meet with Dries Verhoeven during the festival, and we spoke about these two well-known works of his, as well as his latest – and perhaps most striking – work, *Wanna Play?*. At the end of 2014, this latest piece caused upset among Berlin's LGBT community and the users of *Grindr*, a geosocial networking application geared towards gay and bisexual men.








 Dries Verhoeven. Scenography for *Ifigeneia in aulis*. Director Robert Woodfruff. Toneelgroep Amsterdam. 2008

**This is your first time participating in "Homo Novus". How would you evaluate the festival's format and execution?**

I really feel at home at festivals like this. Its program combines great work from all over Europe. When I saw the festival's catalog, I was impressed by all the works they have – there are shows I had seen and shows that I have always wanted to see. And here they are – all in one program!

And then I saw the festival's central hub and met all these young people working there – they are like a squatters' community that has that anarchistic feel – the feeling that, no matter how small the budget is, we will do it anyhow – but with taste, and with anything that we can find to make it happen. That's

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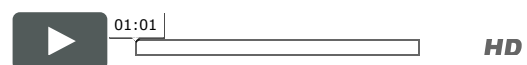
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fantastic! At times I have been invited to theater festivals or art events in Europe at which I have felt intimidated by the prestige and luxury that hang around them – by that feeling of “Wow, we are so important!”. Although it’s fantastic that countries have the money to support the arts and with which to introduce art to the audience, it’s also good to hold on to a certain kind of self-irony; and to stay with your feet on the ground and to have the same freedom as I had when I was sixteen, seventeen, when I was climbing into these kinds of buildings just to search for the unexpected in an abandoned, empty place. And I’m reliving that feeling at this festival – and not the feeling that I should be wearing my suit and pretending to be a star.

**This year the “Homo Novus” festival encompassed a widespread part of the city, allowing for audiences to experience theater in both regular auditoriums and an empty factory. In your work *Homo Desperatus*, it is precisely the phenomenon of these sorts of abandoned, dead territories and structures that you examine. What sort of impression did you get from this old textile factory?**

It’s fantastic! Here in Riga you have so much space! I come from a country where there is no space, where every little corner is given up to gentrified, globalized, company-driven economics. And that’s not the case here – you still have a town with these enormous buildings that can be used by artists. Also impressive is the fact that the city, and maybe also the whole country, are not yet intimidated by an over-awareness of security. There are quite a few countries in Europe where organizing an art festival in such a building wouldn’t be at all possible because of security reasons.

I took the factory’s elevator a few times. Yes, that elevator is 90% responsible for my safety, but the last 10% is me, myself, and if I decide to put my fingers through the wire screen, then it’s my own fault if I encounter a problem. In Munich, a festival with such an elevator wouldn’t be allowed – Germany is full of these safety ‘fascists’, and they are certain that people are not able to care of themselves; they think that the moment the audience enters the building, they lose their common sense. And that’s my biggest problem with working in Germany and working in Holland. I am fighting against these security ‘fascists’ who are taking away so many freedoms – both from the audience and from me.



Dries Verhoeven. *Fare thee Well!*. 11<sup>th</sup> International New Theatre Festival “Homo Novus”. Photo: Andrejs Strokins

**You tend to show your works in a variety of places, beginning with public spaces overflowing with people, to abandoned territories. What role does the selected location play in forming the concept of the artwork itself?**

I like these kinds of factories. The first place where I presented *Fare Thee Well!* was the abandoned Tempelhof airport, in Berlin. I like places where my imagination starts to work, where I can feel the same kind of freedom as I did in my childhood.

And then again – I like the public space because it’s a place where people can decide how long they are in contact with a work. When you are inside a theater venue, then it’s basically the program that decides how long you will sit there. The program says: this work will take 90 minutes; but then comes the moment when you start thinking about what you will eat tomorrow, about all the text messages that are waiting in your cell phone... These are the moments when you start to drift away from what you’re seeing. It is a part of the convention of theater – you are going to be sitting in this chair and you can only leave when it’s done; whereas on the street, you first of all think – I’m going to continue walking from the café to my work, or from university to my house or whatever ... and then, in the middle of the public space, you are confronted with an intriguing or provoking work – and then you can decide whether to stand still or to continue walking. The work doesn’t decide it for you. From that idea comes the fact that I started to make works in a loop; they simply work too long to let you watch the whole thing.

These two works at “Homo Novus”, I showed them inside the factory, but they also function in a loop and you can sit there for hours, if you like; but you can also decide after a few minutes – no, I don’t want that. I am interested in the fact that I can activate you; I can activate the spectator to decide what to do. It has become a part of my work.



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Dries Verhoeven. Fare thee Well! in Vancouver. Photo: Colin Griffiths, Saris & den Engelsman

**What kind of exploration of a space do you do before you start your work? What do you take into consideration?**

It depends completely on the work because I work both indoors and outdoors. Outdoors, I like to activate the audience, and to make that happen I need an audience, so I basically try to be in the center, where the people are. So it's not about aesthetic aspects, it's more about social aspects – where people gather and how can I influence this gathering, how can I interrupt; that's why it is more interesting to put a work right in front of the central station, not in the outskirts of town.

When it comes to *Fare Thee Well!*, it is a work that keeps its distance from this center; it keeps its distance from the city because you're looking at it. You look through the telescope and you see kilometers into the distance. So, very practically, it's about searching the place where this distance is, where you can still see the city that is discussed in the text; and since we are saying farewell, it's always a question of how can we create this feeling of melancholia. The spectator looks through a telescope to the parts of the city that disappeared a long time ago, or that are destined to disappear someday in the future, and he or she perceives an easily legible, continuously flowing text with things and thoughts which, one day, we might have to bid farewell to. The work discusses the changing city, basically. And it is way more interesting to do this in this sort of a factory where you realize that this once was a factory, but now it no longer is.



Dries Verhoeven. Fare thee Well!

**What inspired you to make this piece? Were any currently topical events behind it?**

For a few years now I have been interested in how I can reflect on crisis thinking – the fact that politicians, opinion-makers and cultural pessimists give us the idea that we are living in a world that is slowly disappearing; they present the apocalypse to us. It might be true on an economical level, it might be true on a sociological level, and it might be true on an ecological level, but this thinking along the lines of “Guys, this world is going down!” has become a part of public thinking for the last ten years. And I have always liked to research assumptions, to research our perceptions when we are presented with politicians who tell us these things. “This tsunami of immigrants is coming towards us; the North Pole is going to melt away...” – all of these things I find very interesting from the moment they enter into our brains. I want to see what is going on there – are we still able to reflect on that, or are our emotions taking over? It's not as if I'm giving another value to this crisis rhetoric (the rhetoric around immigrants or the rhetoric on climate change), although I do know that my left-wing artist friends expect that I join the fight against climate change... But you know, I try to disturb; I try to take you out of your comfort zone, and I'm highly interested in creating doubt, in creating insecurity.

So, in *Fare Thee Well!*, I decided to make all these things that people say visible, in written text that people see through the telescope. You look into the telescope and see a city hanging upside down – in this case, the city of Riga – and in the middle of that you see an LED display that is streaming text: all these things that people say, one after the other, in a very business-like way – like the stock market ticker where you can read which stocks are going down and which ones are going up. It's supposed to trigger your way of thinking around this – Did you retain the things that went away long ago? Do you accept the fact that these things are gone, or do you fight against it? Or do you simply take it all with a grain of salt?





Dries Verhoeven. Homo Desperatus. Photo: Willem Popelier

#### What is the idea behind *Homo Desperatus*?

It is a video. Last year I had an exhibition for which I made 44 scale models of places in the world that we normally don't like to see. The models were made out of gypsum, and I let a colony of ants live there. So, there were 3000 ants in every model, trying to build a life in Fukushima, in Guantanamo Bay, in a collapsed textile factory in Bangladesh... In total, there were 70,000 ants; every model had its own camera that filmed the life going on there – we could see how they try to survive there, where they put the eggs, where they put the queen, where they put deceased ants and so on. In the video projection at the end of the exhibition, you could see what could be called a *CNN*-like perspective – the perspective which the media usually uses to try and capture a disaster for its audience.

I hoped to make something highly beautiful that, through this kind of aesthetic, brings the viewer in contact with locations that she or he would normally run away from. If I showed a real location with real people, and if I showed such a large amount of locations, you would switch the TV off; you would not want to be in touch with this enormous wave of despair that comes toward you when you turn on *CNN*. So, once again, it's another perspective.

Maybe that is the similarity between *Homo Desperatus* and *Fare Thee Well!* – I let people zoom out; I let them distance themselves and watch society from afar. As if you are not a part of it, as if you're taking a step back. I am not part of this society, and I also don't do my best to think about the fact that you are part of this society; you are invited just to see your own world being subtitled by way of this LED screen. And with *Homo Desperatus*, I did it as if you were not a human being, because you're looking down at these small creatures – at ants that are the personification of human beings, and you are somewhere, I don't know... hanging in space, looking down at these little creatures. I hope that you see humankind as a species and that you start to think – do we need these disasters, do we need people sacrificing themselves to help the group, or can we do without that?



Dries Verhoeven. Homo Desperatus. Photo: Willem Popelier

#### Tell us about the practical side of this work: Where did you get the ants? How long did it take to make this work? Did you make the models all by yourself?

No, we made them together with 24 people, all young students or people just graduated from different architecture schools in Holland – young scenographers and designers. The actual making of the work took us half a year, but the preparations took one year. The ants come from the biggest ant farm in Europe, which is in Berlin. This ant farm takes ants out of nature and lets them grow, so to say, as a family...

#### Why is there a need for such a thing as an ant farm?

Because people want to have them as pets! First you had a snake, then you had a salamander, and now you can have ants...

#### But why you chose ants?

The ant is the most successful animal in the world. The world is full of ants! There are as many ants as human beings, in terms of weight. So, think of yourself filled with ants and multiply that by six and a half billion – that will be the amount of ants we have on Earth.

And why is that? Why are they so successful? Because the group is always way more important than an

individual. And the individual sacrifices itself for the larger group. I'm not the first person to use this creature as a metaphor for mankind. But in terms of the practical side, it was a big thing when we put these ant families into the models. Over a period of two months, every once in while a new family of ants would be introduced into the studio where we were building the models. After a while, you would learn how they behave, so you would know how to make the model more pleasant than the box in which they had arrived. They arrived three to four thousand ants in a box; we connected this box with a tube to the model. We made them a very pleasant life in the models – in terms of food, drink, light and temperature.

Ants are always busy with how to make a good life for themselves. Always! That means that all day, 30% of the group is busy with finding better alternatives. Every ant has its own function. These 30% are always out and about – they are mainly the ones you see when walking down the street. So, the moment that one of them found the tube, he went in, he found out that it is good, he went back and related this to the other ants by putting down a trail of odor, and then the other ants followed. After a while, there was a diaspora of the whole family going into this new world and leaving the old world behind. When we were not working in the studio – usually from Friday afternoon until Monday morning – the whole family would transfer themselves to the model. And then they started to make their lives there. Of course, they were not aware of the fact that they were putting their eggs into, for example, the most toxic spot of Fukushima! I like the poetry of these creatures – whatever situation they happen to be in, they just try to continue living; they continue doing what they were doing.

#### What happened with the ants after the project?

They were taken to the forest.

#### You have worked together with seniors, children, and people with disabilities. Could you elaborate on this?

I'm not so very interested in performers or professionals because, often times, they are too good at something; and when they are too good at something... I become impressed. I don't want to be impressed by what I'm seeing; I want to connect to what I'm seeing. When I am too impressed by the talent of the performer, I can only applaud him or her for what he or she is doing, but that means that the performer who is showing off his or her talent is shifting the possibility of connecting with him or her.

If you started to sing now, and I discovered that your voice sounds like Maria Callas', I could only applaud and say that's fantastic; but if it doesn't sound so well, then I might sing along with you. That is one of the reasons why I very much like to work with people who are extraordinary in the way they are – simply because they are very young, because they are very old, because they are blind, because they have certain disabilities, because they have an immigrant background, because they live on the other side of the world in a disaster area... Because then we can talk about something else other than talent; then we can talk about their differences, about the differences between them and me. If I could be mirrored by them or if I couldn't. That's why I am way more interested in seeing myself in an 84-year old man, and to think about what does it mean to be in contact with someone who is very, very old, or with someone who is a younger version of me, or with someone who is blind but more able to see the world than I am. It brings me many times closer to the world and to myself.



Dries Verhoeven. Wanna Play? Photo: Sascha Weidner / Willem Popelier

#### At the end of last year, you managed to create quite a scandal in Berlin. For ten days straight, night and day, you were in a glass box and chatting with homosexual men on the geosocial networking application Grindr; all of the texts were projected onto the wall of the glass container, for the public to see. Could you tell us more about the project, and what caused the scandal?

In that work, titled *Wanna Play?*, I questioned the influences that modern media, social media, and, more specifically, dating applications have on the way we connect with each other. Specifically, when we are looking for love or intimacy.

I took my own situation – as a single gay man – as the starting point, and I lived in a glass box for ten days, using my mobile phone to get in touch with other guys who lived in the city in which I was presenting this work. I asked them to come over to where I was and to fulfill my non-sexual desires – to wash my hair, to sing songs together, to hold my hand for an hour while being silent, to read poetry, to play chess, to spoon with me, to fall asleep together, to have breakfast... anything that was non-sexual.

To question the potential of this media (in which we're spending an increasing amount of time) as a tool for connecting on an emotional level, I was making the audience or the people on the street a part of the work – by projecting everything that was happening on my mobile phone onto a big screen. People could see everything I was doing, all the conversations I was having with guys in town, but they were anonymous. Which, of course, also brought up questions – Is the internet a new public space or isn't it? What happens when you make visible all that is going on in your phone? What happens when you put the digital public space into the analog public space?

The controversy in Berlin was about someone who felt attacked by this; he felt trapped – he perceived all of the information that he wrote to me as private information, and he assumed that [by the projection of his texts on the screen] he was being recognized by people on the streets. Well, this was one of the issues



that I wanted to raise, but I didn't expect such a harsh response. He did hit on me, and then he posted on *Facebook*: "This is digital rape. Please demolish the installation!" And many people, from that one *Facebook* post, assumed that I was sharing with the rest of the world this most vulnerable information that people had given me – without asking them, and just to have fun with it. I couldn't stop it! It became impossible to continue.

Of course, when you make people a part of your show and they don't know beforehand that it is for an artwork, you can expect anything, and you should be prepared for any response.

For the sake of authenticity, you sometimes film or record something without telling people beforehand, but you have a responsibility to ensure the safety of those people by making them unrecognizable – blurring their faces, altering their voices or whatever. The internet is no different. For me. It is a place that we all enter and that we sometimes perceive as a private place because it's framed with words like 'friends' and 'buddies', as if we are writing just as we would in our diary, as if we would write to our group of 50 friends: "Hello! I'm having a birthday party!", until your boss finds out that you were all vomiting on the street last night... and then we realize that this *is* a public space that everybody can see.



Dries Verhoeven. *Wanna Play?* Photo: Sascha Weidner / Willem Popelier

When you want to see who are the gay guys in town, you download *Grindr* and you find out in a few seconds – you press the little button and then you see a picture of your neighbor. It's not like a dark room where you need to show your ID to enter and the door closes; no – it's not like that. It has to do with perception, and it has to do with what people perceive as a private space.

Also, it is very interesting – and also sad – to realize that the sexually non-conventional, like the LGBT community, is increasingly using the internet as a place for connecting. It causes an invisibility of gayness on the streets. Young guys decide that it's better to be at home, in the bathroom and using the app to find other guys than to go out on the streets and just start flirting. Which also means that the cafes and clubs will disappear because it's safer to do those things online.

And then you see two developments: an internet that is becoming increasingly more pornographic and rude, where we can say anything we like no matter how aggressive it is; and a public space that is becoming more and more prude and tidy, one where we all know how to behave, and where we all try to stay away from truth – where we all pretend and show the perfect alter-ego. Well, this shifting is what I had hoped to show in the project. The sad thing was that the many of the protesters didn't even see the work, and there was that enormous shitstorm from people who responded to what they had read instead of what they had seen. Even journalists from newspapers like *The Guardian* were taking up positions, simply assuming that what they had read on *Facebook* was something they could trust.



Dries Verhoeven. *Wanna Play?* in Utrecht. Photo: Sascha Weidner / Willem Popelier

**What was the most extraordinary experience you had during this project – the most interesting chat?**

It was interesting to see how people create a perfect version of themselves. When someone is 62 years old and he doesn't comply with the socially acceptable standards for attractiveness, he finds himself in a problematic situation... So, many people use it to pretend to be someone else, and they keep the machine rolling; that's actually very touching. Their behavior leads to the getting of attention. And there is a big difference – when you present yourself in a certain way, you get a "thumbs up", you get a star, you get a "like"... But it's not as if people like the real you, they just like the way you present yourself on platforms like *Grindr* and *Tinder*, apps on which you show a sexual alter-ego of yourself. But when it comes to

Facebook or Instagram, you get “thumbs up” if you present yourself as a very interesting and intellectual person, or as someone who is politically engaging. And when you share an interesting article about refugees in the Mediterranean, it’s not as if you’re helping the refugees – you’re helping your alter-ego, making your friends think that you are “the cool girl” because look at what you posted – you’re not thinking only about yourself, but you’re also thinking of others. People are constantly putting themselves into this showcase. It was touching to discuss this with people who realize that they’re doing that, especially when they couldn’t fulfill [socially acceptable] norms.

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