



Mirrors of Public Space: An Interview with Dries Verhoeven

Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink

Dries Verhoeven is a Dutch artist whose work traverses the areas of performance art, fine art, and interventions in public space. Over the past few years, Verhoeven's work, particularly in public space, has drawn much attention. Through intimate encounters or straightforwardly provocative events, Verhoeven invites passers-by to reflect on how we use, think about, and share public spaces, engaging audiences with diverse social and cultural backgrounds. For Verhoeven, working in public space also creates the opportunity to experiment with the length and duration of the works, ranging from five-minute encounters to one-hour walks to multi-day installations and performances presented at theatre festivals. Whatever the specific form or presentational format, his work opens up space for heterogeneity and diversity in an increasingly commodified public sphere. Dries Verhoeven seeks to redirect the audiences' attention to their own responses, perspectives, and sensibilities, thus rendering the spectators active accomplices of the work.

The conversations with Dries Verhoeven took place on 6 March 2015 and 18 August 2017 respectively.

L. Groot Nibbelink (✉)
Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands
e-mail: l.w.grootnibbelink@uu.nl

© The Author(s) 2018
K. Arfara et al. (eds.), *Intermedial Performance and Politics
in the Public Sphere*, Avant-Gardes in Performance,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75343-0_4

BERLIN-UTRECHT: A SKYPE SESSION ON TREE HOUSES

You have recently moved from Amsterdam to Berlin. Why do you prefer Berlin to living in the Netherlands?

Living and working in Berlin provides me with an outsider position, which inspires me greatly. Apart from the interesting exhibitions and performances that I see here, I feel it is beneficial to be able to take some distance from the place where my work is mostly presented. Looking at the Netherlands from Berlin influences my way of working. I think I dare to take greater risks in comparison to a few years ago. It is a bit similar to living in a tree house, where one is able to go down and drop a few things and then climb up again. It provides me with a different perspective on social affairs, compared to living and working on the same plane as where I present my work.

DURATIONAL STRATEGIES, VISUAL ART, AND THE URBAN CONTINUUM

Looking back at the work you've made over the past ten years, one can notice a shift in the type of works, more or less marked by the performance No Man's Land. Your latest work seems more often inspired by strategies known from the visual arts, and actively engages with public space, whereas your earlier work had a more theatrical slant, and seemed to pivot around strategies of perception. Do you agree with this analysis?

Perhaps there are differences in the strategies that I use and in the form of my work. My recent work often functions or operates in an on-going continuum: one passes or moves through the work, or the installation is on display for a longer period of time. These turn spectators into accomplices, co-responsible for their experience because they have to decide for themselves how long they will stay to look at the work.

In the theatre, the convention is to stay seated (unless you are irritated). But in the visual arts, one is expected to continue to move on until one is interested. I am in search of that latter quality, which is closer to the way we move through urban space. On the way from home to the supermarket or to work, we stop when we encounter something unusual. Over the past few years this strategy has inspired me a lot. I think it creates a more active type of spectatorship. Personally, I feel much more 'awake' when I am in, for instance, a museum, deciding whether I stop or move on. I have to enter into dialogue with myself in such moments of decision-making, and

I feel enticed to focus on the here and now of that actual moment. For me the spectator becomes an accomplice when the spectator's decision to move on becomes a meaningful gesture in itself.

My current inquiry into what the ideal duration of an artwork should be is another reason I model spectatorship on visual art conventions. I have seen a lot of theatre performances in which the primary statement takes about fifteen minutes, in my view. Yet makers create at least an hour-long performance in order to live up to the expectations of audiences and programmers. This does not always enforce the power of the artistic gesture. In the visual arts, the artist is free to slap someone in the face, so to speak, and then leave. We rarely see this in the theatre. In the theatre, we tend to provide nuances, or cloak the gesture in a story, in order to finally make our point. In searching for the clarity of a given gesture, I found that there is much to be gained from fine arts strategies.

It strikes me that for a few years now you've been addressing other topics. Your current projects seem to pivot much more around issues of crisis and human suffering, and perhaps are more provocative than earlier works.

Such topics are chosen intuitively, yet one could say that societal developments influence the content and also the form of current works. We are confronted with many diffuse political hotbeds, and have begun to realise (or suspect) how these influence our daily lives. These so-called crises affect our state of mind and greatly impact social relationships. This fuels my work. And I gradually began to prefer the provocative gesture above the gentle. I think this started three or four years ago, when there were severe cuts to the arts budget in the Netherlands. What really struck me during the debate on art and public funding that emerged was the striking indifference to the arts, primarily amongst politicians. Indifference is the worst response one can get as an artist, I think. The entire debate exposed a gross lack of awareness regarding the potential value of art in society. The prevalent right-wing political discourse was primarily one of distrust towards the arts. As a way of fluttering the dovescots, I wanted to set a new course and redirect attention to politics itself, addressing socio-political issues in a more direct way and taking public space as the primary stage on which to do this.

Apart from this, I truly think that art can be of value within socio-political discourse. Art is able to interrupt the status quo and question our norms and habits. Art can impassion a city. Presenting work in urban spaces affects the scale of the gesture: the work must have a certain force in order to make passers-by interrupt their path through an urban

environment. Unfortunately, there is much art in public space that sets hardly anything in motion. A blue triangle in the middle of a roundabout, for instance, doesn't do much harm, but doesn't achieve much either. In another vein, too much poetry or subtlety will drown in the city, unable to compete with all the other things trying to gain our attention. So, I use other strategies in an attempt to engage an unsuspecting audience. This also creates new types of spectators. My work is now much more often seen by people who did not buy a ticket to see a show or exhibition, and who encounter art by chance, in their daily life.

I think there is great potential in this spontaneous encounter. When I presented *Homo Desperatus* in a museum, I noticed I was primarily interested in the effects it had on visitors who just happened to stumble upon my installation. *Homo Desperatus* is an exhibition about different disaster situations presented in scale models occupied by ant colonies.¹ The unexpected confrontation to casual visitors challenged them to reflect upon their own responses to human suffering. Of course, people could walk away. But do they? That, for me, is the exciting question. When watching TV, for instance, what do you do when you are confronted by images of IS soldiers beheading journalists? Will you switch channels because you don't know how to relate to these images? Or not? I addressed similar issues in *Life Streaming* a few years ago. In that sense, my work is a continuum, as *Life Streaming* also questioned our response to seeing other people suffer. Here, spectators communicated through chat rooms and webcams with performers in a former disaster zone.² My aim was to investigate how a mediatised world alters human relationships, using a strategy of seating spectators behind computers for an hour. As with theatre, I was in charge of the duration of this performance, whereas in *Homo Desperatus* the visitor can opt to stay for four hours or leave after ten minutes. Within such conditions the time investment of the visitor becomes a meaningful gesture in itself.

THE AMBIGUITY OF A BADGE: *NO MAN'S LAND* IN ATHENS

The performance No Man's Land addresses another kind of disaster, namely the inhuman situation of migrants, and European ways of dealing with this. The performance was first presented in 2008 in the Netherlands, in Utrecht, and then toured throughout Europe, each time adapted to local circumstances.³ In 2014, you reworked No Man's Land for the Fast Forward Festival in Athens.



Fig. 4.1 *No Man's Land*. Dries Verhoeven. Photo: Stavros Petropoulos. Courtesy Onassis Cultural Centre/Fast Forward Festival 1, Athens

Yes, it was a valuable project in Athens, I am proud we could make it happen. It feels as if we even might have set something in motion, not just artistically but also on the socio-political level.

No Man's Land is about 'the fear of the strange and the need to visibly exist,' to use your own words. Katia Arfara, the Festival's founding artistic director, told me that it was quite a challenge to present this performance in Athens, as there was much hostility towards migrants. How did these local circumstances impact the restaging of No Man's Land? (Fig. 4.1).

It had an extremely huge impact. During rehearsals, two performers ended up in a police cell. We suspect that they were arrested by the police because they were black. The performers themselves were not surprised at all; they had experienced this before. In Athens, you quite easily get into trouble when you have dark skin and walk through the city. Some policemen are closely aligned to the Golden Dawn, a right-wing political party. It happened regularly that black people were arrested, supposedly to assess their status or to check their residence permit. On the basis of this experience we decided to provide all performers with a badge with the logo of the Onassis Cultural Centre (which organised the festival), their name and their green card number to hang around their necks. This badge meant that the guide was to be trusted. It was really difficult for me to tell the

performers that we were going to work with these badges. The performers, on the contrary, were quite happy with it. They even asked if they could keep the badge afterwards. I found this a rather painful situation. This particular context directly impacted the rehearsal process, and also put pressure on the continuation of the work.

This local context changed the artistic parameters of the project. In the Netherlands, the performance addressed the implicit and slumbering feelings of anxiety towards foreigners. In Athens, the hostility was so obvious that it immediately changed the audience's perception of the work. Due to the Athenian context, the performance became a kind of social intervention. It was hardly possible to consider the performance solely on artistic grounds. When a performer stands in front of you with a badge around his neck that says, 'I am to be trusted,' one cannot ignore seeing that the public sphere is infected with distrust and suspicion.

This creates a paradox within the performance as well. This badge marks the performers as 'other,' whereas No Man's Land precisely seeks to question and invert otherness.

Indeed, it increases the distance between performers and spectators. However, the performance employs various strategies to diminish that distance: the texts provided through the headphones are selected with this goal in mind, and the performance aims at creating a sense of shared time and space. In each city, the texts are to a certain extent adapted to the local context; they are altered on the basis of the stories of the participating guides yet always in relation to the question, 'what is hidden in the silence between you and me?' Consequently, the performance shifts codes in relation to the local context and this context influences the significance of the piece. The last shows in Munich in 2014, for instance, had quite a different impact. Currently, Germany is stirred by the Pegida movement, which explicitly voices distrust against migrants.⁴ At the time of presenting *No Man's Land*, however, this movement was not that strong yet, which rendered *No Man's Land* into a gentler gesture.

No Man's Land was also presented in Valencia, Spain. How did that alter the performance?

The situation in Spain is in many ways comparable to Greece. Both of these countries are portals to Europe for many migrants. When working in these countries, I realised that I had arrived at the heart of the problems that are tackled in *No Man's Land*. In Spain and Greece, the consequences of the EU's Dublin Agreements are much more apparent. The Dublin Agreements state that once migrants apply for a residence permit in one

EU country, they cannot do so in another. So, if your first arrival is in Greece and your application is turned down, you cannot go to Germany, for instance, to ask for asylum.

By far the largest number of migrants enters Europe through Greece, Italy, or Spain, because these countries are closest to North Africa and the Middle East. Speaking generally, these people usually have fewer options than migrants in Germany or the Netherlands, because one needs money to be able to take a flight, or have other means or contacts to get further north and west. It is bitterly ironic. Still speaking in general terms, migrants arriving in Northern Europe, where circumstances are relatively better than in the South, are usually also those with a higher education, better connections, more money, and so on. As a consequence, Greece and Spain receive enormous numbers of less prosperous migrants, and the economic crises, meanwhile, hit these countries hardest. In Greece, the presence of this number of migrants is a relatively new phenomenon. After economic motives, this historical context perhaps explains the population's response towards migrants. It is also somewhat understandable that large numbers of migrants can increase societal confusion. Nevertheless, it was painful for me to see migrants treated with so much mistrust and hostility. In these countries, one directly experiences the harshness of the treaties conjured up by the EU.

This divide between northern and southern Europe also manifested in the working process. We always take along ten performers who have participated previously in the project, from either the Netherlands or Germany. These performers were confronted by fellow immigrants, who will never be able to live in either of these countries. It was this group that suffered from taking the badge, whereas to the average Athenian performer it secured two days free from the risk of ending up in a cell. This latter group's primary concern is survival; they hardly had any time for feelings of pride. This is a radically different reality. We talked a lot about these issues, of course. There were feelings of envy, but it did not create unworkable tensions within the group. It rather increased the awareness of the harshness of the situation.

Did you address these issues in the performance itself?

In an indirect way we did, since we touched on some of these issues in the text provided through the headphones. We address the fantasies about 'the land of destiny' prior to actual migration. In the case of Greece, the imagined nation differed tremendously from the actual situation. For some migrants, the Greece of their imagination was rooted in ancient

times, as the cradle of democracy. If it was already that good 2000 years ago, it must be heaven now. But once they arrived in Greece, they found the situation to be radically different. Asylum procedures are harsh and inhumane in comparison to the Dutch system. In Greece, one has to show up each morning at 5:30 and queue with one's papers from behind a large fence. Each day fifty people are picked randomly. If you are not one of them, you have to return the next day. It can take weeks before you are chosen. But even after acquiring a permit, a migrant is alone; there are no facilities or institutes that assist in settling in this new place of residence.

Are you still touring with this performance?

No. The last *No Man's Land* took place in Munich, in 2014, after which we decided to stop. This is more due to practical reasons than artistic ones. It takes a lot of time to restage this performance. Even though I regard it as an extremely important project, I also need time to develop new work. The performance accommodates twenty spectators at a time, so only a small number of people can see it. Because performer-spectator pairs traverse the city in a rather private walk, the performance is fairly invisible to passers-by. Other works, like *Ceci n'est pas*, for instance, which consists of a ten-day installation on a public square, reach a far larger audience.⁵ All these concerns made me decide to stop the project after six years.

SCHIZOPHRENIA IN PRUDISH PUBLIC SPACES

Now that you have created quite a few performances and installations in urban space, what is your analysis of public space? What is 'going on' there, at the moment?

Perhaps I should start by saying that public space can serve as a mirror, showing society in all its diversity. The more people feel invited to show and express themselves in public space, the more prominent the function of this mirror. That is why I value public space so much. What I observe, though, is that this mirror function has weakened. I notice an increase of prudery and of attempts to wipe out the more unconventional or uncomfortable voices. Our cities are literally covered with images serving a neo-liberal agenda. Public life is progressively tainted by commercial messages and the indirect gestures of city marketers. I wonder what the consequences are of situations in which, as soon as we leave our homes, we are mirrored by commercial advertising, showing ideal versions of ourselves. What are the implications of living in public space as though we are living

in *The Truman Show*? In all my projects, my concern is with the outcasts and the exceptions to the rule. That is why I like graffiti, for example, as a token of civil disobedience, questioning the systems that govern our lives. I think it is of vital importance to use the public space for reflection on who we are and how we behave.

Nowadays, the Internet seems to have taken over this role; it offers a space to express ourselves. As such, the Internet provides us with new public spaces, but these are also the type of spaces that give room to the more violent, aggressive, less nuanced versions of ourselves, or our more pornographic selves, explored in *Wanna Play*? From what I can see, something has changed over the past decade. Because we have new media at our disposal, we tend to neglect the analogue public space. That is why *Wanna Play*? investigates queerness in public space, and enquires into whether public space mirrors sexual diversity.⁶ I notice that the people who renounce the heteronormative world seem less inclined to take to the streets in order to defend sexual diversity. For them there is an alternative space provided by the Internet, where they can expose their desire without fully showing themselves. Yet using the Internet in this way is actually a case (continuing the analogy of urban space), of hiding behind a lamppost.

So, social media has become part of our public space, but paradoxically increases patterns of invisibility.

Chances of encountering other than normative behaviour are smaller, anyway. You will not see it, unless you actively search for it. My Turkish neighbour, for instance, has far less chance to stumble upon a cruising area or gay pubs than ten years ago, as gay dating technology has rendered them redundant. They have disappeared from sight. These meeting places firstly serve a particular peer group, but secondly function as spaces of emancipation, because they increase the visibility of such groups and safeguard social and sexual diversity.

Would you say then that social media becomes a hiding-place?

Yes and no. Let me be clear — I am also quite a fan of social media. Yet there is something paradoxical in the way we approach digital and analogue public spaces. In the analogue space, I dare to say that now, more than in the eighties, people are startled when they see an elderly man walking hand in hand with a child. They get suspicious, thinking that this could be paedophilia. Simultaneously, our children are watching and downloading raunchy porno movies in the private space of their bedrooms, and this is somehow tolerated. These realms seem to grow apart;

digital space on the one side offers an extreme or intensified version of life while simultaneously, the physical urban space is increasingly prim and proper. Street-level public space progressively becomes straight-laced and normative, where we adapt ourselves to what is perceived as ‘normal.’ This paradox is probably most explicitly addressed in *Ceci n’est pas* which fully focused on giving room to exceptions to the rule. *Wanna Play?* and other projects, however, also follow this line of thought. The same goes for *No Man’s Land* in Athens, because for the average Greek it is quite exceptional to traverse the city alongside a black performer. I think it is extremely valuable to not look away and instead engage with these exceptional scenes or situations, in particular when these situations are charged with controversies. One can ‘disarm’ such events, precisely by exposing and looking at them.

Perhaps these are practices of ‘collaborative maintenance’ then, counter-forces to prudish public spaces, training our capacity to keep our minds open to the option of ‘the always-otherwise.’

I would like to address the public space as a space for social encounters, because this function of public space seems to disappear. Although I can’t prove it, I can observe that the openness to provocative work is diminishing. Take *Ceci n’est pas*, for instance. We have been presenting this installation for two years in different cities in Europe. During these two years, we have met increasing resistance. In Helsinki, in November 2014, we were not allowed to present the scene with the 84-year-old naked woman. This strikes me as quite remarkable in a country with an explicit sauna culture. This was not done because of complaints; rather, it was a precautionary measure by the police in case someone might take offence to it. Nudity, then, is mistaken for pornography (Fig. 4.2).

Interestingly, local artists started to question this policy, asking why ten years ago Spencer Tunick was allowed to take pictures of hundreds of naked people, their bodies arranged on the streets, and now a scene with an old naked woman is prohibited? Currently in Lausanne, a woman has brought a lawsuit to prevent the father-and-child scene, a scene in which a child sits on the lap of a man, both in their underwear. She stated that the work would permanently damage the child. Something similar happened in Hamburg, this time with the portrayal of a fourteen-year-old pregnant girl.

These examples indeed build up to an impression of increasing prudishness.



Fig. 4.2 *Ceci n'est pas*. Dries Verhoeven. Photo: Willem Popelier

Yes, and furthermore, there appears to be less and less support for art and other agents of critical investigation. People no longer seem to regard art as a tool for questioning the status quo. Provocation is not valued as an instrument for exposing conventional habits.

Provocative art itself becomes the object of straight-lacing perhaps?

Indeed, which also signals that people are less willing to reflect on how ambiguous societal issues are dealt with and less eager to discuss this. Instead they regard this deviation from the norm as inconvenient. They prefer to remove the provocation instead of targeting the issues that art renders visible.

INTERMEDIAL ENCOUNTERS

The role of (social) media and the mediatisation of society have risen to the surface in this conversation. You often work with mediatised encounters yourself. Why?

I explicitly use digital media in *Wanna Play?* or *Life Streaming* to question both the use of digital media, its implicit myths, and the way it impacts

social behaviour. Social media, for instance, often promises social connectivity, yet what is the quality of these social contacts? Some of my other work purposefully withdraws from this and seeks to provide a space for reflection. *No Man's Land*, for instance, stages a physical encounter with a migrant precisely because migration is mainly discussed in newspapers and on the Internet, which tends to abstraction of the phenomenon. Migrants and refugees are objectified as the assumed victims or perpetrators. All the while, the very concrete experiences and circumstances of migrants and refugees move out of sight.

What is the role of the live performance in such mediatised living conditions?

Theatre creates live encounters, which makes these meetings inherently ambiguous or multi-layered. While we post our messages and opinions on the Internet, we create alter egos of ourselves. In live situations, we cannot hide ourselves that easily. *Wanna Play?* directly addresses this issue, as it seeks to physically materialise the online chat room. My aim here is to re-establish the connection between digital and analogue spaces and to render this relationship perceptible. People post all kind of private stuff on the Internet. Yet as soon as this information is commented upon by their colleagues or employer, they are quite shocked. Apparently, they still regard the Internet as a private space. In the case of the Grindr app, people post rather explicit sexual pictures. They address their peers, yet they get upset when these peers approach them in public space.

Wanna Play? raised controversy in Berlin and had to be cancelled halfway through its designated ten-day run. How are you preparing for the Utrecht version in May 2015?

In comparison to Berlin there will be a few changes in terms of how and when I display information from the chat room. Looking back at the Berlin event, I think I underestimated the role of privacy in Germany, which differs significantly from the Netherlands. Due to Germany's particular history, there is a huge anxiety about espionage. Take for instance the controversy when it turned out that the NSA was eavesdropping on Chancellor Angela Merkel.⁷ This was a huge scandal in Germany. To give another example: the Germans have blurred their houses on Google Street View more than in any other European country. Dutch responses to privacy issues tend to be much milder. The main reason for the rise in controversy in Berlin, however, was the wave of commentary on the Internet by people who had not themselves seen the work. The Internet is of course a wonderful platform for public discourse, but in this case, it also created inaccurate debates and seriously hindered the work.

SOCIAL MEDIA: A TROJAN HORSE?

When art becomes the object of large societal debate, it also proves its socio-political function. Social media plays a major role in this, as your story demonstrates. Social media, however, also excels at creating hype, which adds to the impression that we tend to exacerbate serious debates.

Social media indeed allows art to be brought closer to everyday life — which is also why social media has been embraced by marketing. Marketers will usually enjoy the hype as an indicator of success. But hypes are also problematic when non-informed debaters alter the course of discussion to such an extent that the actual topic or subject is overshadowed. The controversy around *Wanna Play?* directly demonstrates this. Many comments exposed personal anxieties that had nothing to do with the actual project. Something similar happened to Brett Bailey's 'human zoo' in *Exhibit B*.⁸ He exposes a black person in chains, amongst others, a bit similar to Black Pete in *Ceci n'est pas*. Both these works question the continued currency of indirect or subtle patterns of prejudice and discrimination. Bailey is a white male from South Africa, which led someone to post: 'White South African chains blacks again.' In the UK, this was taken up by hundreds of people, whose protesting in front of the theatre led to the event being cancelled. Bailey took the exhibit to Paris in December 2014, where policemen had to guard the theatre and do safety scans on the audience in order for the event to continue. In both these examples, the protests are primarily distributed through social media, fuelled by people who have not seen the work or did not properly inform themselves about what the work is actually about.

Social media and the arts are therefore entangled in a complex relationship. It appears that with the large-scale use of social media, art marketing let in a Trojan horse. Art institutions have several roles to fulfil in the contemporary art scene. One function is to present artworks that are perhaps more challenging to understand, and to explain why they think such work is important and valuable. This becomes increasingly difficult in a hype-oriented society built on pop-up opinions. I recently read an article in *The Guardian* in which a journalist cites Facebook as a trustworthy source. I think we could and should reflect more critically on the tools that we use, instead of letting ourselves be led by our guts.

In cases of social censorship, some precarious balances arise. To return once more to *Ceci n'est pas* in Helsinki, we decided to show the 84-year-old lady, but with underwear. I also could have opted for showing an

empty box with a sign stating that the scene was censored. However, a possible side effect would have been to nourish the idea that the particular scene was indeed harmful or questionable. Instead, as a response to *our* solution, people started to question the police's regime. They criticised the regime as patronising and inquired why this scene could be shown all over the world, but not in Helsinki. They asked what the harm was for a child to see the breasts of a naked old woman. In the end, these discussions were much more fruitful than an empty glass box would have been. I could have dug my heels in, or ignored the police orders, but sometimes it is more productive to go for, 'okay if you want the lady in underwear, you will get it.' Hopefully something similar will happen with *Wanna Play?* I would be very happy if it led to conversations on how we deal nowadays with intimacy and sexuality; on how we might appreciate intimacy again. I hope it will open up a space for deviation from the (heterosexual) norm. In other words, I intend to turn the public space into a space for social encounters — if only temporarily.

EPILOGUE: AUGUST 18, 2017

In retrospect, has your view on working in public space changed since our last discussion, or do you see connections with recent projects such as Guilty Landscapes and Phobiarama? Although dealing with similar socio-political issues, they do not address the public at large and instead invite one or two people at a time.

My view has not changed much. Each work asks for its own context — sometimes this is a public space, but not necessarily. *Guilty Landscapes*, for instance, required a space in which I could isolate the spectator. But, a new project could as easily take place, once more, in public space. *Phobiarama* does address the use of public space as an entertainment space.⁹ For me this project connects to our earlier discussion on neoliberalism and the ways in which economics govern both politics and our daily lives. In short: fear is money. *Phobiarama* literally uses the formats and strategies of advanced capitalism. The spectators are treated as anxiety-consumers and fun fair customers; I draw on their desire for fear-induced excitement. Once they are inside the installation, however, my aim is to dissect this fear-driven economy and to explore the mechanisms and motives behind this desire (Fig. 4.3).



Fig. 4.3 *Phobiarama*. Dries Verhoeven. Photo: Willem Popelier

Briefly returning to Guilty Landscapes — Why did it necessitate a space of isolation?

Guilty Landscapes is an installation that intervenes in the flood of disaster-laden images that constantly engulf us when we watch the news.¹⁰ I wanted to put this news stream on hold, so to speak, and arrange a situation in which a spectator spends time with a protagonist from the eight o'clock news. Usually these images flash by while we are eating our spaghetti, or whatever we are doing, and we can stay rather distanced from the portrayed victims. In this installation, the protagonist returns the gaze of the spectator. In order to create a sense of encounter, and to provide the spectator with some time to explore what it means to be an active witness, I needed a quiet space, and one single spectator at the time.

When it comes to the issue of isolating the spectator, I doubt whether there is actually that much difference between the isolated space of *Guilty Landscapes* and the isolation brought about by the headphones when walking through Athens' back alleys in *No Man's Land*. This strategy of isolation is a recurring element, yet the actual form or set-up is a constant variable.

Phobiarama *premiered in Athens in May 2017 within the fourth East Forward Festival, while simultaneously you worked on a Dutch version. Do these versions vary a lot?*

For each we use found footage that is relevant to that particular local context, referring to politicians, terrorists, or other public actors who intend to influence or frighten us by exercising a politics of fear. For the Athens version, I collaborated with Theodora Kapralou, a Greek dramaturg, in order to collect the material. I got a crash course in Greek politics, in addition to what I already knew from creating *No Man's Land* in Athens. Working in parallel on both versions was actually very helpful in finding out what exactly I was looking for during the creation process.

Did the responses differ, when comparing Athens with, for instance, presenting Phobiarama in the Netherlands?

My impression is that in Greece, there seems to be less fear of Islamic terrorism in comparison to the Netherlands. This is rather remarkable, because Greece has a higher number of refugees than the Netherlands, which in the Dutch discourse is considered a risk factor. The most prominent fears in Greece are more related to the on-going economic crisis, which has a direct impact on daily life. In comparison, the threats presented by Dutch politicians seem far less plausible. When Dutch politicians talk about economic crisis, it often relates to a set-back in 'consumer confidence' or something similar, whereas in Greece there is a concrete chance of losing your job, your house, or pension. I often have the feeling that in the Netherlands, danger tends to be imaginary or hypothetical rather than real. Statistically, there is hardly any reason for anxiety. In the Netherlands the chance of dying a non-natural death has never been as small as now. At the same time, the number of people with anxiety disorders has never been higher. Fear is primarily a mental condition, and this is what politicians, but also the media, thrive on.

The Athenian audience actively responded to the political agenda of *Phobiarama*, and started to discuss how the rhetoric of fear defines current political discourse, whereas the Dutch first addressed the form of the installation before getting to the larger issues. In Athens, *Phobiarama* was sited in front of the parliament, at Syntagma square. Perhaps this influenced the discussions, but I am also inclined to think that the Greeks in general are more sensitive to how political decisions impact their personal life. At the same time, I noticed a similar hostility towards migrants as with *No Man's Land*, and there are also Greek politicians — even those considered to be moderate, like Kyriakos Mitsotakis¹¹ — who use fear as a means

to support their own politics, presenting statements like, ‘we are not afraid of Islamic State but we should be.’ Such arguments support the IS agenda, which is painfully ironic.

Phobiarama and *No Man’s Land* address similar topics, yet your way of dealing with those issues differs. Could you elaborate a little on the differences?

Revisiting this interview made me realise that *Phobiarama* is perhaps the grim little brother of *No Man’s Land*. Both draw on a deliberately created caesura between what you see and what you think you see. In *No Man’s Land*, I provide you with insight into this relationship and the opportunity to reflect on it; you could call it an exercise in projection. *Phobiarama* on the other hand, is less about how words are used to frame people as outsiders, instead targeting framing techniques that rely purely on images. The piece stages and ridicules this framing. While *No Man’s Land* reflects on pre-existing thoughts and ideas of hostility, in *Phobiarama* I go to some lengths to create such fear-induced images myself. I stage the media and I use the same media strategies, in order to go straight to your anxiety receptors. *Guilty Landscape* uses different tactics again — yet all these works are connected through their critical assessment of our current media landscape. They all explore how media changes the way we perceive one another and how media is deployed to stage someone as either a victim or a perpetrator. Media obviously use strategies that rely on staging. These projects examine how media shapes societal conditions, by (re)staging those same strategies.

NOTES

1. In *Homo Desperatus* (2014) visitors walk past forty-four display cases with true-to-life scale models of human suffering: Fukushima’s nuclear reactor, the parliament buildings in Kiev, a drug clinic in Germany, a collapsed clothing factory in Bangladesh. See Dries Verhoeven’s web site, accessed 10 September 2017, www.driesverhoeven.com/en. All references to Verhoeven’s performances discussed in this interview can be retrieved through this website.
2. *Life Streaming* (2010) takes place in a bus, aka Internet café, in which each spectator communicates live with a performer in a region 8000 km away that has been previously affected by flooding. Through this personal contact with the performer, the performance addresses personal yet ambivalent relationships to disasters in the developing world in a media-saturated society that renders catastrophes omnipresent.

3. In *No Man's Land* (2008), individual spectators are taken out on walk through the city, guided by a migrant, a 'foreigner' they do not know. The spectator wears headphones through which a text is provided about what it means to live your life as a migrant.
4. Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West (German: Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes), abbreviated PEGIDA or Pegida, is a German nationalist, anti-Islam, far-right political movement.
5. In *Ceci n'est pas* (2013), a glass box of about 1 × 1 × 2 meters is placed in the middle of a city square. Each day, a person, scene or object is presented, with an 'explanatory note' on the side, which instead of explaining, actually questions what the passers-by think they see. By 'displaying' a transgender or an elderly naked woman, for instance, the work taps into social taboos or dispute, enquiring into the lack of diversity within (commercialised) public spaces.
6. In *Wanna Play? (Love in the time of Grindr)* (2014), Verhoeven investigates the phenomenon of 'on demand' love, facilitated by the rapidly growing practice of dating apps. From within a glass house in the city centre, he chats with Grindr users. During ten days, visible for everyone, he searches online for people who are willing to satisfy his non-sexual desires.
7. NSA is the United States' National Security Agency.
8. Brett Bailey's *Exhibit B* critically investigates the dark history of European colonialism. While silent black actors re-enact practices of ethnographic display, human zoos, slavery, and scientific racism, the installation also refers to present-day equivalents. *Exhibit B* was also presented in Paris in 2013; Dries Verhoeven addresses the protest that accompanied the 2014 event. See 'Exhibit B,' Third World Bunfight, accessed 10 September 2017, <http://thirdworldbunfight.co.za/exhibit-b/>
9. *Phobiarama* (2017) uses the format of a haunted house to enquire into our contemporary culture of fear, exploring the tactics of terrorists, politicians, news-makers, and other marketers by restaging them. The installation addresses the wide-spread desire and fascination for phenomena that fuel feelings of anxiety, meanwhile scrutinising the tension between real danger and imaginary threats.
10. *Guilty Landscapes* (2016) is an interactive video installation, in which a single spectator encounters a 'protagonist from the news,' who is sited in a location or environment that is often associated with poverty or despair. This protagonist responds to the presence of the visitor, creating an opportunity for viewers to examine their sense of responsibility or feelings of discomfort.
11. Kyriakos Mitsotakis is the leader of the centre-right party New Democracy and the leader of the opposition since January 2016.