

The mirror of public space
Interview with Dries Verhoeven
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Below is an excerpt of the interview, held over Skype in the spring of 2015. The full (and updated) interview will appear in the collection *Intermedial Performance and Politics in the Public Sphere*, edited by Katia Arfara, Aneta Mancewicz and Ralf Remshardt.

Berlin-Utrecht : a Skype session on treehouses

6 March, 2015. On my screen a modular ceiling appears. Below is the face of Dries Verhoeven, who settles down in front his webcam from an internet café in Berlin, the city having become Verhoeven's regular place of residence since he moved there from Amsterdam. Such encounters as the ones afforded by digital media will be a recurring topic in our ensuing dialogue. This conversation could not have started in a more pertinent way.

Why do you prefer Berlin over 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 treehouse, 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 the ones where I present my work.

Durational strategies, visual art, and the urban continuum

Looking back at the work you made over the past ten years, one may notice a shift in the type of works, a shift 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 such an 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 ongoing continuum: one passes or moves through the work, or the installation is on display for a longer period of time. By doing this, spectators become accomplices: they are co-responsible for their own experience. 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 tends to walk on until one is interested. I am in search of that latter quality. This quality is close to the way we move through urban space. While we are on our way from home to the supermarket or the workplace, we stop when we encounter something unusual. This strategy has inspired me a lot, over the past few years. It creates a more active type of spectatorship, in my view. I myself feel much more 'awake' at least, when I

am in a museum, for instance, and have to decide whether I stop or move on. I have to enter into dialogue with myself in such moments of decision-making, and I am enticed to focus on the here and now of that actual moment. For me the spectator is an accomplice; a spectator's decision to move on becomes a meaningful gesture in itself.

Another reason for modelling spectatorship on art conventions is my current inquiry into what the ideal duration of an artwork should be. I have seen a lot of theatre performances in which the primary statement takes about 15 minutes, in my view. Yet, one creates 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 context of the visual arts, one is free to slap someone in the face, so to say, and then leave. We hardly 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 search for the clarity of a gesture, I found there is much to be gained by looking at strategies in the fine arts.

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 work.

That is right, yet this is a direct response to societal developments and our current state of life. In public debates, the word 'crisis' is omnipresent. And indeed we are confronted with situations of great despair and many diffuse political hotbeds. Such times of crisis provide much inspiration for artists, anyway, they fuel my own work. These crises inflect our thoughts and experiences, and greatly impact social relationships. And indeed, I gradually began to prefer the provocative above the gentle gesture. I think this started about three or four years ago at the time of severe cuts to the arts budget in the Netherlands. What really struck me in the emerging debate on art and public funding was the striking indifference regarding the arts, primarily amongst politicians. The worst response one can get as an artist, I think, is indifference. 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. Therefore, as a way of fluttering the doves, I wanted to set a new course and redirect the attention to politics itself, by addressing political-societal issues in a more direct way and by taking the public space as the primary stage on which to do this.

Apart from this, I truly think that art can be of value within a 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 as much as how I work. The work must have a certain force in order to make passers-by stop their course in an urban environment. There is much art in public space that hardly sets anything in motion, unfortunately. A blue triangle in the midst of a roundabout, for instance, cannot do much harm, but won't achieve anything either. Too much poetry or subtlety will drown in the city as well; it simply cannot compete with all the other things in public space that try 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 an exhibition and by chance encounter art in their daily life.

[...]

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 and show 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. Instead, 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 neoliberal agenda. Public life is progressively tainted by the marketing of products on billboards and in shop windows. 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*?¹ 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 the reflection on who we are and how we behave. Nowadays, the internet plays a major role in this: 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 see, something has changed over the past decade. Because we have new media at our disposal, we tend to neglect the analog public space. That is why *Wanna Play*? investigates queerness in public space, and enquires into whether public space mirrors sexual diversity.² 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.

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

Yes and no. I am also quite a fan of social media, let me be clear. Yet there is something paradoxical in the relation between digital and analog public spaces. In the analog space, 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 spaces seem to grow apart; digital space on the one side offers an extreme or intensified version of life while simultaneously, the physical urban space increasingly gets 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.

¹ Peter Weir's science fiction satire *The Truman Show* (1998) portrays the quaint everyday life of Truman Burbank, the main character in the film, who is completely unaware that his hometown actually is a TV set, and his life scripted by TV producers.

² 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.

Wanna Play? and other projects, however, equally follow this line of thought. [...] 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 situations, 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, which consists of a ten-day installation on a public square, reaches a far larger audience.³ We have been presenting this installation for two years now, in different cities in Europe. During these two years, we are meeting more and more resistance. In the Helsinki edition, 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 on the basis of complaints; it was a precautionary measure by the police, in case someone might take offence to it. Nudity then is mistaken for pornography. 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 announced to start 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 thinks that, because it involves a child, it is unacceptable. Something similar happened in Hamburg, this time with the portrayal of a 14-year-old pregnant girl.

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

Yes, and furthermore, there appears to be a decreasing awareness of the value of art as an agent 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 becomes the object of straight-lacing itself perhaps?

Yes, 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.

³ In *Ceci n'est pas* (2013), a glass box of about 1x1x2 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 explanation 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 (commercialized) public spaces.

Intermedial encounters

The role of (social) media and the mediatization of society already rose to the surface in this conversation. [...] What is the role of the live performance in such mediatized living conditions?

Theatre creates live encounters, and this still has much potential. 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 chatroom. My aim here is to re-install the connection between digital and analog spaces and to render this relationship perceptible. People post all kind of private stuff on the internet; yet as soon as this information is displayed in the urban public space – no matter how much one anonymises these posts – or commented upon by their 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 angry when these peers approach them in public space.

Wanna Play? raised controversy in Berlin and had to be cancelled halfway of a designated ten day period. How are you looking forward to the version you will present in Utrecht in May 2015, during the Spring Performing Arts festival?

There will be a few changes, in comparison to Berlin, with regard to how and when I display information from the chatroom. Looking back at the Berlin event, I think I underestimated the role of privacy in Germany, which differs significantly from the Netherlands. Also due to Germany's particular history, there is a huge anxiety for espionage. Take for instance the controversy when it turned out that the NSA was eavesdropping on Chancellor Angela Merkel.⁴ This was a huge scandal in Germany. To give another example: more than in any other European country, the Germans have blurred their houses on Google Street View. Dutch responses to privacy issues tend to be much milder. The main reason for the rise in controversies, however, was the wave of commentaries on the internet provided by people who had not seen the work themselves. The internet of course is a wonderful platform for public discourse, but in this case, it also created inaccurate debates and seriously hindered the proceedings of 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 excel in creating hypes, which adds to the impression that we tend to exacerbate serious debates.

Social media indeed allow for bringing art closer to everyday life – which is why it has been embraced by marketing as well. Marketing 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 gets overshadowed. The controversy around *Wanna Play?* directly demonstrates this. Many comments exposed personal anxieties that had nothing to do with the actual project

⁴ NSA is the United States' National Security Agency

itself. Something similar happened to Brett Bailey's 'human zoo', in *Exhibit B*.⁵ 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' on the internet. In the UK, this was taken up by thousands of people, protesting in front of the theatre, due to which the event had to be cancelled. Bailey took the exhibit to Paris in December 2014. Some 50 policemen had to guard the theatre and perform 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 on what the work is actually about.

Social media and the arts therefore are entangled in a complex relationship. It seems that, together with the large-scale use of social media, (art) marketing also brought in a Trojan horse. Yet art institutions also have other roles to fulfil in the contemporary art scene. Their function is also to present artworks that are perhaps more challenging to understand, and to explain why they think that 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 and presents this as a trustworthy source. I think we could and should reflect more critically on the tools that we use, instead of that we let 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 expose the 84-year-old lady, but with underwear. I also could have opted for showing an empty box signed with a message that the scene has been censored. However, a possible side-effect of such a decision is that you nourish the idea that the particular scene indeed is harmful or questionable. 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 can be shown all over the world but not in Helsinki, asking what harm there is in a child seeing the chest of a naked old lady. These discussions in the end were much more fruitful than an empty glass box. I could have been resilient, or I could have neglected the police's 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?* when presented in Utrecht. I would be very happy if it would lead to conversations on how we deal with intimacy and sexuality nowadays, on how we might appreciate intimacy again. I hope it will open up a space for deviations from the (heterosexual) norm. Put in other words, I intend to turn the public space into a space for social encounters – if only temporarily.

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⁵ 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 <http://thirdworldbunfight.co.za/exhibit-b/>.