



DRIES VERHOEVEN, YOU ARE HERE. PHOTOGRAPHY: ANNA VAN KOOIJ

Dries Verhoeven's theatrical world based on spectators' experience

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I was let into a room, all alone. One of the walls of the room, no larger than the living room of a house, was completely covered by an image. It was a scenery from Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti: taken from a hilly area, in the foreground a mud puddle with lots of garbage, just behind it a jerry-built house with other jerry-built houses in the background and behind them all low hills and the sky; a time of twilight. While I could not figure out if the image was moving or not, a shirtless black man sitting on the edge of the puddle stood up and approached me. First, he stared at me, then began to mirror my moves, my poses, my positions in the room. I was a little bit nervous as I wondered how the man in the picture could see me and imitate me. I was surprised to realize that the moving picture was not pre-recorded as I thought before, and was live instead. The man was nice, young and friendly, so my nervousness de-escalated. After a short while he ceased to imitate me and instead started to direct me, not with words, but with movements; for

instance, he pointed to the place where I should stand in the room. We were facing each other; he stood on top of the garbage in the puddle and I was in the middle of the bone-dry room. Then he leaned down and turned on a tape recorder. Rhythmic local music began to play and he began to dance with his lithe body. He demanded that I imitate him. I was shy and uneasy at first, a little bit tense due to the unusual situation I found myself in: I was dancing, in a somewhat large room in the backstage of a theatre in Berlin, at an hour long after midnight, face to face with a black man from Port-au-Prince via live video footage. We were communicating through our bodies. In those five minutes there were only the two of us; occupying two different places on earth but the same time span. We were two different people from two completely different economic, societal, cultural and spatial environments, but we shared a common thing during that time span. Then he approached me; his face covered the whole screen. He thanked me with a vaguely Mona Lisa-like

smile and got out of the picture. So, my time to leave the room had also come.

Guilty Landscapes is an episodic work by the Dutch artist Dries Verhoeven. Since May 2016, in each episode of this work, performers and spectators from different parts of the world have been connected via live video. After experiencing, live in person, that shared environment of time-of-beyond-space, it is impossible not to reconsider anew this technology which most of us use in our everyday life of Western standards. It is also impossible not to admire the artist who employs this ordinary technology at our disposal in the service of such a genius idea. Thus, Verhoeven creates a powerful work that turns upside down the roles of the performer and the spectator, that obscures the relationship between the spaces in which the two exist, and that lets them experience the same time span by doing so.

Verhoeven states in the brochure: "People sometimes ask me about the how and why of a work. But why talk

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DRIES VERHOEVEN. PHOTOGRAPHY: MARIJN SMULDERS
(LEFT PAGE) CECI N'EST PAS NOTRE PEUR DRIES VERHOEVEN PHOTOGRAPHY: WILLEM POPELIER



when my work is merely speaking in images? Why clear up when ambiguity is in the core of the work." This discreet approach relates completely to *Guilty Landscapes*, where communication consists only of mimicry, gestures, and movements, in other words through the whole body. So indeed, there is no need of words for communication; understanding, trust, and empathy are enough.

Born in 1976, scenography graduate Dries Verhoeven is renowned in the Dutch theatre scene for his designs that stretch and increasingly defy boundaries between the stage and the auditorium, and which resemble more to installation works. He sees the theatre as an event, as a collective experience merging the spectator and the performer. So, he is seeking possibilities to include the spectator directly in the production in radical and unexpected ways. He intends that the spectator communicate with the work not through identifying with someone on stage but through physical experience.

His first works were influenced by the 'theatre of experience' popular in Holland and Flemish Belgium. In this theater style directors like Ivo van Hove, Guy Cassiers, and Marcus Azzini and Lotte van der Berg (with whom he has worked personally), focus on the encounter between the performance space and the audience's emotions. What Verhoeven tries to introduce into this style is to emphasize the role of the performer only to the extent that it stresses the work's being in the 'here and now' in his own words "to take the performer entirely out of the work." In this sense, one of his most impressive works was 2007's *U bevindt zich hier* (You are here), in which each solitary spectator lying in a hotel-room-like box begins to realize that s/he is not alone when the mirror-covered-400m² ceiling slowly rises, letting all the other spectators in the boxes see each other.

In recent years, rather than theatrical works staged in indoor spaces or theater buildings, Verhoeven has produced more works of visual art that use the public urban space as a stage. In these recent works, he considers the spectator as an accomplice and puts her/him in a position similar to that of a museum visitor so that the spectators have "to decide for themselves how long they will stay to look at the work." According to him, unlike the stationary theater spectator who has to sit in a chair for a certain period of time, the museum visitor in motion is "an actively thinking viewer." With this consciousness, in his works in the public space, Verhoeven focuses primarily on the attention, the partnership and the resultant experience of the passer-by. He thinks that the value of art as an agent of critical investigation and the mission of provocation as an instrument for exposing conventional

habits has decreased. Therefore, in his recent works he especially aims to question societal norms and habits in the public space, and he succeeds. His 2013 work, *Ceci n'est pas...*, which consisted of an extraordinary person displayed in a glass box on a city square, was censored in the 2014 Helsinki edition by the police because he presented the scene with an 84-year-old naked woman. In a similar vein, he himself ended on the fourth day the 2014 Berlin edition of the ten-day *24/7* installation *Wanna Play?*, in which he put himself in a glass box soliciting strangers on gay hook-up app Grindr and projected the resultant conversations with other users onto a screen outside in a public square due to the controversy on Facebook.

His most recent project, 2017's *Phobiarama*, is described as an immersive live installation. With this work, Verhoeven returns to his first period of experiential theatre and reduces the role of the visitor to that of a stationary and passive spectator. However, the theatrical realm which he offers to the spectator is worth experiencing. *Phobia*, derived from the Ancient Greek *phobos* meaning 'fear,' is a suffix that forms a word according to the type of the fear—for example, claustrophobia, or as a common fear in Europe and America in these days, Islamophobia—but here it is used at the head of the title. As for diorama, it refers to the miniature three-dimensional scene, in which models of figures are seen against a background and in which real life is imitated as literally as possible. So, Verhoeven had prepared a three-dimensional scene for visitors which is some kind of an abstract simulation of real life.

Phobiarama was displayed within the scope of 70th Holland Festival in Amsterdam in June 2017 in a black tent decorated outside with bare lightbulbs, as on a fairground. It was placed in the middle of Mercator Square. The Square is the centre of a neighbourhood created by the famous Dutch architect Berlage as one of the first examples of the garden-city idea in the 1920s, and today predominantly immigrants inhabit it. Every hour, 20 spectators in groups of two were allowed inside. They got on the ghost-train-like cars connected to the ground via rail and took a 45-minute ride around the big indoor space. They were confronting their fears; however, these fears were very different from those of the ghost trains.

Verhoeven had constructed an atmosphere of fear upon many factors fueling today's climate of fear: Extreme right-wing or fascist governments, or terrorist organizations that have succeeded in manipulating society through terror and security; ecological rhetoric, such as climate change, which emphasizes how little time the world has left without precautions, or which speaks of the

potential harm of synthetic products to humans; and, of course, the fear of the 'non-self,' namely the 'other,' that has seized most of the world's societies.

Phobiarama was a three-dimensional miniature world bred by all these fears that take ordinary human life prisoner with the help of elements from the real world. The monitors placed at the top corners of the walls were used not only to display audio recordings of today's right-wing and fascist politicians, but also to live-broadcast black-and-white images recorded by cameras in that room, referencing the surveillance devices as the indispensable feature of today's governments' control mechanism. The cars on the rail were also used as objects that fueled the fear in the room, playing with various speeds and directions; sometimes they moved very slowly, sometimes very fast in reverse.

To promote this uncanny realm of fear, Verhoeven not only created an exceptional physical space with color, music, sound, and objects, but he also employed live performers who went far enough, even if controlled, to have physical interaction with the spectators. During the 45-minute piece, the same performers played the roles of three different horror images. Among these, the first one might have been the most ancient and primitive fear of mankind: the bear walking on its hind legs. Under the bear costume was found a contemporary collective horror image: the clown. The last one was the real-life appearance of the performers. The performers, no longer in costumes, embodied the most 'ordinary' fears of the average white European citizen. They all were from non-European races; North African, Middle Eastern or black. On top of that, they were all very tall, tattooed bodybuilders. They could easily and instinctively be put into the category of the 'other'; they could have been involved in criminal or deviant activity or even escaped from prison.

In this last crucial -and poetic- sequence of *Phobiarama*, Verhoeven masterfully displays the gap between the visible and the real: he displays, in front of the eyes of the spectators in an explicit and 'live' way, the artificiality of fear and that fear is nothing more than a product of 'fiction'. He brings face to face moving humans in the flesh, in other words, performers and spectators in this environment while stripping and unwrapping the performers of the images imposed on them by the 'ordinary fascist' gaze and everyday fears of the spectators, and by enabling both the spectators and the performers to live through this emotional experience in person.