

Only doubt can save us

In an attempt to relate to the unclear, incomprehensible and sometimes frightening world, we are constantly attempting to create stability. We decide how everything functions, what our position is with respect to what we see or hear, what is desirable and undesirable. We fill up Wikipedia. We make rules. We make sense. We draw boundaries. Our thinking is a continuous manufacture of stability. Only through such self-negotiation can one sleep at night.

Oh were we just a worm, then we wouldn't have to relate! Then we could work our way consuming and copulating to our finality. But worms we are not. Most of us have at least heard one clock chime about ruthless natural phenomena, about the finality of our body, about injustice in the world. And, behold, the tragedy of the conscious organism, we need to do something about.

We live in a time when a multitude of perspectives reach us daily. And that does not always lead to changing our opinions. Rather, we have seen this continuous confrontation of alternative voices as an attack on world views which we created in the carefree fin de siècle of the 20th century. Our grip collides with those of others and as a result, we don't always question our ideas, or not thoroughly or genuinely enough, and our manufactured truths become dogmas. We pull ourselves back into our own bubble.

The question that has been puzzling me for twenty years is how to disarm the viewer, how to turn the viewer into a mollusc, soft and receptive to doubt. In times of increasing polarization, that need only becomes stronger. I am convinced that when we are regularly thrown off balance, we can confront the social debate in a more sensitive and less didactic and binary manner. It's not up to the artist to bombard the spectator with yet another truth. But instead I hope to work on a periphery of a debate, to question and shake up belief systems. I believe in the subtle breaking down of boundaries: the boundaries of the axioms in the mind of the observer and the boundaries of assumed decency. The most lasting memories I have as an observer are those when I felt like a child, who had to conclude with wet eyes that his puzzle had just fallen apart. Uncertain, I had to try to put the puzzle back together again.

That questioning of certainties lies at the heart of what I hope to do: I regularly change disciplines and mediums of expression. A few years ago I was a scenographer, then a theatre director and now visual artist, or maybe I'm still all three, or something in between. Sometimes an idea in my head manifests itself as an object, at other times as a happening or portable installation. I derive a childish joy in changing the playing field, a new creation must be a leap in the dark. It is also a strategy to keep the visitor uncertain. I think the spectator approaches a work unconstrained if they cannot directly link it to a previous work, or better still, if what they see does not immediately appear as a work of art.

I love to blur the lines between real and unreal. For example, I like to place work on the street where it becomes unclear if it is staged or not. In recent years, I regularly use the internet as a means of engaging the spectator. I am fascinated by this "new" public space, and the extent to which it influences our perspective and behavior in the analogue world.

The deceptive promise of the Internet as a representation of the non-digital world makes it the ideal place to let the spectator doubt about fact and fiction.

By the way, it is not yet a sinecure to stay ambiguous in form and content. With every presentation again there appears a small army of marketing staff, journalists and academics ready to define the gesture. While I think that gestures are most valuable when they bring us into imbalance, and thus preferably unexpected and unnamed in form, part of the art world benefits from identification and clarity. How should a work be described in the seasonal brochure if it is not clear whether it is an installation or a film? Why would an art collector buy a piece that looks nothing like a successful earlier piece? And who determines and pronounces what is a success? The need to value something is the polar opposite of my own desire to be inestimable. Valuation is something for 50 years down the line, for the art historians who live then.

If I manage to avoid an applause moment, then please be it so. The artificial time limit between the proposed world and reality often gets in the way. I would rather see a visitor cautiously enter the outside world, not sure if what he has just experienced continues, infiltrates the world we call our reality.

It is for this same reason that I like to make work for the visitor who is free to roam and move at their own pace. In a museum or in public space, the viewer determines himself when he has finished looking, in a sense he is complicit in his experience. When you do not mention the duration of a piece, nervousness grows in the visitor's body; have they looked well enough, is there anything more going to happen? Is there perhaps another meaning that the viewer only discovers if even more attention to the work is exerted? Or has one been standing minutes watching the Emperor's new clothes? It's a more uncertain viewing situation than that of the theatre seat, we're more cautious with our verdict.

In 2016 I made *Guilty Landscapes*. What I hoped to do was to confuse the news images, to let the viewer look again at what is so often and clearly presented as problematic. Some see it as the artist's task to show misunderstandings in society. An at least as valuable task, I think, lies in offering value-free viewing. Artists are not the messengers of correct thinking, not servants of decency.

Of course, it is worrying if we are unaware of problems in the world. But equally worrying is if we are going to live by those concerns, if we view the protagonists of the news bulletins only as victims. Precisely in a world where information about the lives of others does not come to us through first-hand experience, but mostly from the media devices that surround us everywhere, it is important to be modest in our assumptions.

*Guilty landscapes* is a series of 4 video works. The visitor enters a gallery room, the door closes, he is alone. On a wall he sees a video projection of a problematically assumed place in the world, in the first episode a clothing factory in Hangzhou, China. The sound of weaving machines is overwhelming. The visitor sees on the screen that one of the factory workers, a young Chinese woman stops her work and begins to imitate the visitor's movements. If the visitor holds up their hand, the factory worker will do the same. The moment of mimesis confirms the good old narrative of the globalized market economy in

which our behavior in the West influences people's behavior in distant places around the world. Does the notion of post-colonialism and imperialism accompany these kinds of environments, gets in the way of adopting an unconcerned attitude? Does the visitor dare to do a lambada dance to see if the Chinese woman does it too, or does the environment puts them in anticipation of a debt-conscious position?

But then the woman stops imitating. She puts on noise-muffling headphones and the machine sounds become muted. The woman crawls over the factory floor and lies under one of the weaving machines. She motions to the visitor to lie on the gallery floor. The roles are reversed. Woman and visitor crawl closer to each other, both closer to the screen, the only thing that separates them. The Chinese woman stretches out her hand, when the visitor does the same and touches the projection screen, he seems to be in touch with someone far away. The boundary between film and reality seems broken down. Digital becomes analogue. Not much later, the woman is behind her weaving machine again, the noise returns in the gallery room. Many visitors remain staring unsure at the screen for a few minutes. Have they just been through a Skype connection with an unknown person in China? Or was she just an avatar in a clever computer simulation? The visitor will not get an answer.

The protagonists (or their media appearances) seem to be aware of the fact that we, gallery visitors / TV viewers from the West, are watching them. They are witnesses to our witnessing. It shows the internet as a medium built on reciprocity, it exists by the grace of an upload and a download. Perhaps refugees also read *The Guardian* on their phones. But how that thought further influences your daily life is up to you. One critic said in a review: "What does Verhoeven want to do exactly with *Guilty Landscapes*? Am I allowed to know that?" No, sorry, I have no message for you. I cannot tell you if we should commit ourselves to the closure of Chinese factories and sweat shop labor. No matter how much I understand that there is a need for a new stability, the value of the art for me lies in the disorder, nothing more. Only doubt can save us.