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Alexandros Diakosavvas

Guilty Landscapes: A new challenge by Dries Verhoeven at the Athens Festival. One year after the unforgettable *Phobiarama* the Dutch artist returns to Athens with a new work, that investigates the indistinct roles of the victim and the victimizer in today's society of doomsday rhetoric.

Dries Verhoeven offered Athens one of the strangest, impressive and unforgettable public space installations of the last years. For those of you who move around the center of the city and Parliament Square, you will remember a black prefab building/box that was set up in the center of the square about a year ago.

Phobiarama was presented by the Dutch artist for Fast Forward Festival, the annual festival of the Onassis Cultural Center, and was "the talk of the town" for the duration of the "shows". Anyone who passed by wondered what was going on in this construction, the appearance of which, as well as the name itself and the promotional photograph with a clown, looked menacing.

In *Phobiarama*, Verhoeven toyed with our collective fears in a psychological roller coaster with a wonderful climax, and even now that this specific performance is touring Europe and will be in London and Vienna in the next months, we can not give away more details about it or the surprises it contains.

One year later, the artist returns to Athens with a work that is equally political but entirely different. *Guilty Landscapes* lands at EMST as a highly anticipated action by "Opening to the City" organized by Athens Festival. Though its format may seem more "conventional", as it is the first episode from a series of large scale video installations that the artist was commissioned to make by various European countries in 2016, the power of the images promises that it will be equally exciting.

In western society where numerous "difficult" images of destruction and despair are consumed through the smart phones, tablets and television screens, Verhoeven reverses the condition in a devious way and places the victims of these catastrophes, the people who are inevitably placed in an unfortunate position (and "framed" so by the camera that films them), to look

back at us.

Is there space for a personal connection between the viewer and he/she who becomes the spectacle? And what if we are the victims and not they?

“Eight years ago I met a 16 year old sex worker on a beach in Sri Lanka, who offered me his services” the artist recalls when I ask him when the idea behind *Guilty Landscapes* began.

“Besides declining his offer, I tried to convince him to change his profession, telling him that prostitution may not be the best way for him to satisfy his need for intimacy. His answer was both revealing and disarming: “I need money for university and I have no problem with prostitution. Who are you, man from the West, who will patronize me?”

“That is when I realized that his identity as a victim was part of the way that I perceived him and not necessarily reality. I never would have spoken that way to a western sex worker.”

And if eventually we are guilty of something, what is it? Perhaps our profuse consumption of images without reacting? The sense that we are superior because we are not in their position? Or is it perhaps that we have become desensitized and indifferent to violence?

Verhoeven is not sure if we are the ones who are guilty and he proposes, through this specific installation, that in reality the “landscapes” are guilty, the environments that subconsciously make us feel sorry for the strangers on the other side of the world.

The politics of these images, the artist explains, is that they are contaminated with the suspicion of fear and desperation and he quotes Susan Sontag from *Regarding the Pain of others*: “As long as we feel compassion, we feel like we do not participate in that which causes the pain. Our compassion proclaims our innocence as well as our incompetence”

The works of Dries Verhoeven are usually on the cusp of large-scale installation work and live performance and often offer commentary about the relationship between the audience and the artist, daily life and art.

His work is not elitist and the viewer is implicated in the work as he/she

witnesses it. He remembers the reaction of the Greek audience to his previous works as being quite political.

“Athens experienced *Phobiarama* as a motivation to re-examine the politics of fear. *Guilty Landscapes* investigates the way in which strangers are presented by the media. This time I will connect the audience not with those who appear to be the victimizers (as in *Phobiarama*), but with those who are perceived as the victims.