

GUILTY LANDSCAPES, EMST, ATHENS, JUNE 2018 DRIES VERHOEVEN INTERVIEW TO FAYE TZANETOULAKOU CULTURENOW.GR

Dear Dries please talk to us what triggered you initially to create the quadrilogy *Guilty Landscapes*, of which the first episode, *Hangzhou*, we are about to see during Athens Festival, at the National Museum of Contemporary Art.

- There have been quite a few moments the last few years where I felt trapped in feelings of social hyperconsciousness, moments in which I felt responsible for the lives of faraway strangers. Investing some time to talk with these people and to scrutinize my feelings of discomfort, made me realize the mechanisms of news media that victimize the protagonists of the news. Media portray certain situations too simple and biased. I felt the urge to dig for extra layers.

We are being bombarded by a continuous influx of images on a daily basis through different media. How hard is, for an artist working with visual images, to grasp the waning attention of an overwhelmed viewer?

- In times of post truth politics and fake news, shocking images and video feeds might not influence us any longer. We reach a state of numbness and start to distrust the agenda of the sender of such images. I hope to create a real connection between the viewer and the subject being watched, to look beyond that agenda. But indeed, that's not easy. There are quite a few defence mechanisms the viewer has to put aside.

Watching, and interacting with the video projection and its two protagonists, the bleak landscape and the powerful presence of the person at the other end of the screen demanding my attention, I strongly felt a combination of fear and awe, in a real Kantian sense. Is this the contemporary Sublime, hidden within a devouring everyday context?

- I hope so. The meeting of beauty and horror - is something I aim for, in every work again. It's a call for the viewer to look beyond the dread, to fully sense the tragedy, but at the same time to reconsider his position of power as a viewer. Being a pure witness might give you a feeling of power. Instead I hope to reach a sense of vulnerability in the viewer. Not to look at the news but to look with the news. I'm convinced that also in the most bleak situations, there is room for recognition and fragility.

In your recent visit to Athens last year for the Fast Forward Festival, you presented us with *Phobiarama*, an interactive piece prompting us to confront our innermost fears. This time, with *Guilty Landscapes*, the emphasis moves towards confronting a disturbing reality, that is not our reality, or at least not yet. So again we are meant to face a looming distress in relation to how easily things could go wrong. If the purpose of art is to pave the way for real change within society, could you say that fear is a positive force? In other words, is safety the scarier of the two?

- I hope to stay close to a state of uncertainty. In this and other works I try to encourage an audience to question the prefabricated frames with which they meet the protagonists of the news, both the supposed perpetrators, as the alleged victims. In that sense *Guilty Landscapes* is the negative of *Phobiarama*. The call for safety, as the mantra of the neo liberal world in which we are living, is dangerous in that sense. It does his utter best to confirm the status quo, to block self-criticism. It divides and conceals. But well, fear is also not our best counselor. An anxious human is not particularly able to reconsider his own position.

Last year when Documenta 14 came to Greece, its curatorial team promised to avoid falling into the trap of “po(o)rnography” as they astutely called the tendency to stimulate feeling through overt references to the Greek crisis—already into its tenth year of austerity measures. Few months ago The Guardian advertised “crisis trips” to Greece in its travel section (which due to public outrage had to be cancelled). However, in the case of *Guilty Landscapes*, the situation is reversed! It seems to me that the viewer assumes the role of the ‘exhibit’, and for the first time he is accountable for his/her reactions when dealing face to face, with an uncomfortable subject matter outside of his comfort zone. Talk to us about your innovative interactive technique that raises a discussion on the concept of ‘seeing’ in a political context.

- I wouldn’t be able to phrase it any better than Susan Sontag does in *Regarding the pain of others*: “So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent—if not an inappropriate—response.” In other words, pity patronizes the subject. Care is power. By booking such a crisis trip you describe, one reconfirms his superior position. *Guilty landscapes* for me is not about changing your opinion. It’s also the viewers body that interests me, the interactive nature of the work (hopefully) makes her engage.

In what ways has your interdisciplinary approach, in relation to theatre and the visual arts, helped in bringing the subject closer to an audience?

- The live aspect of performance art helps me to activate an audience member. Who else then another human being can put us in motion? The theatre seat though is one of the most numbing places I could imagine. What I took from

visual arts is the possibility to address the moving viewer. The museum context makes the viewer complicit to the impact and understanding of a work.

If you were to trace back your artistic roots, who/what would be your source of inspiration?

- Meeting people I didn't understand or didn't obviously relate to has always been a source of inspiration. When I started making performances, I worked together with young children and elderly. I've been trying to understand my gaze through the perception of a blind person and to reconsider the way I deal with loss by talking with Sri Lankan Buddhists. In No man's land (Athens 2014) I worked together with a group of refugees. Thinking back I've actually always tried hard to avoid working with likeminded people.

Was your emancipation as an artist being related to a call for more freedom of expression during the 90s? How do you feel that has changed in today's world?

- I'm not that old...could you specify your question?

At the end of the day where can we search for the truth, in the midst of all these information? Can art serve as a medium?

- No, art cannot and shouldn't merely share the truth. I oppose to this idea of art as a guide. I hope to disrupt your moral compass, not to lead your way.

Thank you Dries for your meaningful words and most of all thank you for your art!