

NEIGHBOURHOOD

A Glance That Triggers Movement

Dries Verhoeven's *Ceci n'est pas*

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In 1934, Virginia Woolf wandered through the streets of London, about which she testifies: “I find it impossible to walk down the street without stopping, it may be in the middle of the road, to ask: why? Churches, public houses, parliaments, shops, loudspeakers, cars, the sound of airplanes in the clouds, men and women—all gave rise to questions.” The question *Why* thus enables us to bring to a standstill the motion of walking through cityscapes and to freeze-frame. It is precisely this moment of doubt and reflection we see surfacing in Dries Verhoeven's project *Ceci n'est pas* [This Is Not] (2013).

Ceci n'est pas is a performative installation comprising a series of ten living tableaux²⁸ placed in soundproof glass booths in public space. Over the last five years, this installation has been shown in seven cities.²⁹ Everyday, bystanders meet at the exhibition site, sometimes intentionally, sometimes accidentally, and thus can look at another tableau in the series: *This is not Art* (a percussionist playing drums with hammers instead of sticks, thus destroying the instrument); *This is not a Mother* (a pregnant minor dancing with earphones on); *This is not Love* (a middle-aged man reading a book to a ten-year-old girl sitting on his lap, both dressed in underwear); *This is not the Future* (a balaclava clad young man sits on a pile of projectiles and polishes one of them), *This is not History* (a dark-skinned performer, half-naked and shackled, holding a sign announcing the number of minutes to the beginning of the show), *This is not Nature* (a transsexual performer dressed in feathers on a swing), *This is not our Desire* (a woman dwarf sitting at a table taller than herself, smoking and drinking alcohol); *This is not our Fear* (a Muslim joining in prayer while listening the faithful being called to prayer through a loudspeaker); *This is not my Body* (a woman of about seventy sitting naked wearing a mask whose silicone features are those of a young woman); and *This is not Me* (an urn placed on a thick layer of earth full of worms).

28. During the installation in Poland, eight of the ten living tableaux were exhibited. The entire documentation for the installation can be seen on the artist's website.

29. bit.ly/2MsigQv, last consulted 14 January 2019.

In Verhoeven's words, the installation comprises “images we're not used to seeing in public space.”³⁰ These static images, limited due to the confined space, and yet dynamic due to the actions performed by the performers, are accompanied by music that invites the public to come closer, thereby lending the ensemble the feeling of an outdoor event. Spectators can also familiarize themselves with the text displayed on the booths—bearing the title of the work and a factual description, formulated in cold and commercial phrases—similar to a description of a product in a store's showcase or in a showroom. These images can thus arouse anxiety, indignation, or indifference, images from which Verhoeven generates as many representations of “the DNA of our time.” In every city where *Ceci n'est pas* was put on exhibit, it provoked divergent reactions; these multiple representations can thus be considered as a probe measuring the social climate. The diversity of reactions offers proof that the DNA of our time mutates according to social context, aesthetics, and cultural norms in any given setting.

30. bit.ly/2MsigQv, last consulted 14 January 2019.

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With the title *Ceci n'est pas*, Verhoeven overtly refers to the painting by the Belgian surrealist René Magritte *This Is Not A Pipe* (1929), probably the most celebrated commentary in the history of contemporary art on the relationship between reality and its representation, as well as the significance and function we attribute to both. By continuing in the vein of Magritte, who in his painting played up that the pipe is not the real object but merely a pictorial representation of it, Verhoeven toys with the public's expectations and triggers a difficult decision-making process marked by an emotional energy. To what extent is that which is visually presented a "real" scene, with which an ethical and political relationship persists? To what extent is it a theatrical play and to what point is it a perverse illustration, whose titles should be read in the affirmative: *This is...: Nature, our Desire, our Body, Love, and Mother?*

Ceci n'est pas in Poznań

Ceci n'est pas was presented in Poznań in 2016 at the Malta Festival, as part of "Idiom"—in the thematic section of the festival titled "Paradoks widza / The Paradox of the Spectator." While the section's curator, the Dutch theatre director Lotte van den Berg, had began her career staging shows in traditional theatres, she has ever since been exploring the potential of public space as a laboratory for emotions, ethical attitudes, and shifting definitions of reality. At the centre of Idiom's program's, she placed the triple figure of actor-spectator-witness, thus underlining the paradox inherent in the act of observing. In her own words: "We watch the world while being a part of it. Watching something in a way gives you distance to it, it separates you from the thing you are watching, and at the same time it connects. The act of watching is about being far and close at the same time. It's about being there with the other and not."³¹

31. bit.ly/2MpScFw, last consulted 14 January 2019.

The paradox resulting from the twin feeling of proximity and distance, the responsibility for that which we see, and the indifference inscribed in the role of a passer-by, was particularly striking in the version of *Ceci n'est pas* presented in Poznań. Moreover, this paradox was repeatedly highlighted by the newspaper edited by Wojciech Wołosznik, engaged by the Malta festival at Verhoeven's express request to document the project's every phase.³² Wołosznik worked every day for several hours as a reporter-observer, listening to the passers-by's conversations, or even intentionally initiating a dialogue with them. He daily reported on reactions by spectators in a blog dedicated to the project. Many were particularly striking; they show to what extent that which we see is rarely a vision of objective reality as shared by everyone, but rather an image comprised of our vision/s of the past, our emotions, the iconosphere in which we live, social realities—both political and historical. Many passers-by in Poznań, for instance, interpreted the drummer's attire as a miner's clothing. This perception can be explained by the key role mining played in the Polish economy, and consequently in the local collective consciousness.

32. bit.ly/2RYZ2qX, last consulted 14 January 2019.

The paradox of the responsibility for that which we see, and the indifference inscribed in the role of a passer-by.

The explanatory texts accompanying the tableaux vivants were adapted to the Polish context and formulated in such a way that, while remaining cold and impersonal, they exposed prevailing taboos and touched upon sensitive social issues. *This is not a Mother*, featuring a pregnant minor, was to provoke contradictory reactions: some accused the artist of supporting the idea of underage motherhood whilst others thought it was meant

to promote the contraceptive pill. Over and again the blogger noted how the public more rarely wanted to comment on their way of seeing things without first reading the explanatory panel. Thus, Verhoeven captures the prevailing tendency to interpret reality in accordance with received instruction manuals (customs, law, moral and /or semiotic systems), and skilfully directs the tension between the intensity of the scenes displayed and a technical commentary of images that elude categorisation.

Apparently, the discomfort repeatedly engendered by direct visual contact between the installation performers and their numerous spectators was a characteristic feature. At times, this discomfort led to violent reactions, with some passers-by hitting the cabins, or then again with demonstrations of empathy. During *This is not History*, a member of the public watching the acrobatics of the black artist wrote on a piece of paper “SORRY FOR THE POLISH CROWD” and stuck it on the glass cabin. During *This is not Love*, a passer-by called the police to inform them that an act of harassment was being committed in public space. By simply setting up a modest stand in the city centre for several days Verhoeven can change the social dynamic and push numerous by-passers to question their standpoint on reality. He thus reveals that the paradoxes inherent in our ways of seeing things are still present on multiple levels and that, thanks to them, we remain alive.

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In Verhoeven’s installations, happenings and performances, the viewer is implicated in the project in a way that is difficult to predict, and often radically so, although based on an open relationship—namely, that of a voluntary glance. Verhoeven’s work unfolds on three levels. The first is based on that which is beyond the visible, that is to say, that which usually belongs in public space, as for example the construction site incorporated into his open-air installation *Sic transit gloria mundi* (2018), which resembles a conventional workplace, or the metal glass booths in *Ceci n’est pas*. The second level differs from the first, in that it is invisible, as with stage directions. Finally, the third level involves the viewer’s behaviour vis-à-vis this detachment. The invisible-visible game particularly evokes images that hurt and trigger internal upheavals. *Ceci n’est pas*’s forceful impact lies precisely in our contact with exhibited images that force us to open our eyes to other visions of the world. Spurred on by renewed relationships with a living image, we observe *differently* that which we see everyday while walking through the same streets. Our glance triggers micro-shocks in our standardized image of the world, causing it contours to momentarily fade. The thrill running through our bodies caused by this situation will often be barely explicable and difficult to neutralize.

Translation (French): John Barrett

bit.ly/2MsigQv

bit.ly/2CDWVyT



*Ceci n'est pas:
Ceci n'est pas de l'art*

Dries Verhoeven

Festival Malta, Poznań, 2016

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*Ceci n'est pas:
Ceci n'est pas une mère*

Dries Verhoeven

Festival Malta, Poznań, 2016

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*Ceci n'est pas:
Ceci n'est pas de l'amour*

Dries Verhoeven

Festival Malta, Poznań, 2016

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*Ceci n'est pas:
Ceci n'est pas le futur*

Dries Verhoeven

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*Ceci n'est pas:
Ceci n'est pas de l'histoire*

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*Ceci n'est pas:
Ceci n'est pas la nature*

Dries Verhoeven

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*Ceci n'est pas:
Ceci n'est pas notre désir*

Dries Verhoeven

Festival Malta, Poznań, 2016

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*Ceci n'est pas:
Ceci n'est pas notre peur*

Dries Verhoeven

Festival Malta, Poznań, 2016

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