

UNSEEN PERFORMANCE

Stroll and unruly

Dear Antonia, Bernadetta and Franziska,

I saw you during the tour I made through Noord-Holland, and the other places I found myself this last year, and made pictures of you when you were not aware. I did not dare to ask because I was ashamed. You, of the same age as me or even older, had to work so hard in the youth hostels and palaces (Venice), where you dust, make breakfast and clean the toilets.

I did a lot of subservient work myself and, if possible I NEVER want to do it again.

I have been lucky in such a way that I had enough money to go back to school at the age of 50.

But that does not mean I do not see how much work is done behind the scenes.

I want to explain to you what I have done this year, and what I am still doing.

But first this: these last thirty years I worked really hard in all sorts of ways to understand myself and the world. I have been meditating for twenty five years, been in therapy for a long time, and five years ago I went, at fifty one years of age, to an art academy.

I owe a lot to Buddhism but just as when you leave your parental home, at a certain moment, I also wanted to leave to live my life without rules from the outside.

What I know by practicing Buddhism: reality is bigger than what you can see with your day-to-day head. By meditating long and often and studying a lot and being with a teacher, you can experience that. You can coincide with the world.

Maybe I wanted to go to an art academy because I felt that there you can also coincide with what you do. I do not know anymore; the same way I choose for Buddhism when I was 28, this choice was also mainly an intuitive one.

If you have not experienced it yourself, you do not know what it means to be at an art academy, but it is really difficult and scary in the beginning. You are being judged all the time and you do not know yourself, what you are doing, or what is expected of you.

But last year I was somewhat more at ease and suddenly a manifest came out of me:

Manifest

I go alone

By bike

As much as possible without a goal

To places I don't know yet

To be as receptacle as possible for reality

(...) this is what I have been doing now for just under a year.

I live in Amsterdam and I went camping in back gardens, in houses and in a classroom at the academy.

Besides being on the road, arriving, departing, and being, I write, if I feel the need for it, read, and take photos.

The first time I left with my bike I went much too far. Far beyond what I was capable of and I was totally exhausted, after two days. I realised I had put far too much pressure on myself.

If there is nobody else who makes the rules for you, you discover how you treat yourself.

So I go without a goal, but because there is no goal, I have to decide every time, each time, which way to go. When I am 'on the road' I abolish the usual time, so I don't divide the time in little parts as we normally do.* Now and then that works by itself but sometimes I have to look within myself again and again to know what I want. That is not always easy. Sometimes it really confuses me. I am responsible for what I do and cannot blame anybody when it is not going so well.

Just as when creating a piece of art, which will hang in a museum or a gallery, an artist also has to extract this from oneself.

Why did I start this? I was looking for a way in which I could combine my life and art making. I think I already knew that I had to look for a new way to be alone with myself, as you are when you meditate. But I did not want to meditate anymore. I did not want to belong to a group anymore. I wanted to decide for myself what my view of the world was and no longer look through the lens of Buddhism.

Looking back, I like not to sit still inside but to move and go outside!

When you ask, how are you going to make money when you leave school? Which is usually the only question I hear when people know I am at art school. I do not know. I want to try to be faithful to my work.

Before I started my 'tour' my subject was: the Marnixstraat.

At first I did not know what I was doing but I got to know the street better and better by being there. It seems a small subject but you could also do it with one paving stone. Though that is different. But one square meter where you can sit and stand on is comparable. One paving stone is more of a visual experience. A place you can also experience physically.

It is really different in various parts of the street and also at different moments but a place can really have good or bad energy.

My first camping-bike tour was to Uithoorn. There was an 'art route' (for amateurs) in which I participated. All goody-goody little paintings and thingies and ladies that organised it, except my host, who was great and not a lady and I was the artwork camping in the back garden near the lake.

In retrospect this was the most difficult 'performance' of all, because I had to explain to the visitors of the art route what I was doing; camping and living, and almost nobody, including myself, understood.

Because I did like the idea of camping in back gardens, I kept on doing that during the summer in Noord-Holland.

I was on the road a lot. I arrived, I departed, and sometimes I stayed in a garden for a longer period.

Now that I am on adventure for a while, I know better why I wanted it and what it gives me to be on the road.

An active mind makes me the happiest and that mind stays active by doing things I do not know yet and by being able to decide by myself what I want.

Not that I am happy all the time when I am on the road! It is not always easy to be without an end time, to not plan as much as possible. Every decision can always be changed again. And there is nobody to deliberate with. All the time I listen to myself inside, to what I want. Sometimes it can get pretty exhausting. It is not that I do not plan anything because that would drive you crazy. Sometimes I plan to stay somewhere for a few days. Also, I conform to the rhythm of day and night. But meal times are abolished when I am alone. And I can recall my decisions at any moment.

Why would you save your holiday feeling for the holidays?

This works for me. I do not want to say this would be precisely the method for somebody else.

I find it interesting to learn how the brain works. I do not know a lot yet, but I was very glad when I heard that, in contrast to what was known before, the reptilian brain, the oldest part of the brains, can still change. So if you have gone through difficult things in your life and you still suffer from it, it can change! By playing! By not keeping to your own rules. And that is easier when you do not live in your usual daily routine.

I do not need proof but still, it is nice to read how it works on a biological level.

We have to free ourselves. From everything that is and of how it should be!

I think of you, love

To Francis Boeske, gallerist

Dear Francis,

Even though it is difficult I do want to try to find out why it is so complicated for me to go out, in the world, with my work, in what I see as the 'real' art world. For me it feels as the not-real world.

My adventure in the Citroënhallen serves as a good example of how that could go.

I liked very much when I heard on the radio how the photographer Koos van Breukel reacted immediately to a cancellation, which resulted in him constructing a big exhibition in just two weeks. I was already there before it started. It turned out there was also another exhibition downstairs, from Unseen Amsterdam.

Also after the exhibition was opened I came back several times, especially for the photos of Jan Hoek. But also because I liked the space downstairs, still almost the old

Citroëngarage. I was so enthusiastic that I dared to phone you and although you sounded a bit irritated, I did send you the series of photos I made last year, together with my husband Martien, of the Marnixstraat.

And you liked them, and you liked the text; for me that was the nicest thing. It was the first time a text of mine was outside of the school.

But, and here is the knot I don't want to chop but untangle, it did not feel nice at all. As soon as I show my work in the outside world, I get into a state that delivers me totally to THE OTHER.

I am proud, scared, everything. And I don't have Pride anymore, no opinion of my own, no ground. It is comparable to your birthday. It is nice and not nice at the same time.

It has to do with the attention, but also with the scariness of being in the attention.

And with my subordinate position. I really like to show everybody my photos hanging in public but that side of the matter also evokes tension.

It all clashes, banging internally with each other. So I get totally confused by everything because I am not there myself and all kind of emotions and misunderstandings appear.

The project I have been busy with, for just under a year now, and for which 'the Marnixstraat' was a precursor, is also about taking a closer look at expediency, purposefulness, living with a purpose, that's what I found out until now.

I go on the road, without a purpose, on the bike, alone, to be as receptive as possible for reality. This was my manifest, with which I started last year. And since then it has become my work, my life to investigate what it means to be on the go, at another place, at home, to live together, to be alone, to make art you can see and touch, to live art.

To leave art in public space and to exhibit in places meant for art; it is a research and it is my life.

I don't want to put myself outside of the world, so maybe I have to find a trick to manifest myself among gallery-people and others that can help me bring my work into the world. I already did an experiment at school by letting somebody else do a presentation of my work. It didn't go perfectly well because it wasn't prepared well enough but it could be a solution.

I do have trust in the future. But how do you not feel totally dependent on people who can determine your professional destiny? With you it went all right in the end but I would like it to become easier.

I did change the text of 'the Marnixstraat' a little bit; the war and the emigration are in there now too:

The Marnixstraat

I tried to come back to the street and the feeling of the street in everything I did in the Marnixstraat.

My grandparents were living on the Leidsegracht for 60 years, just around the corner from the Marnixstraat, not during the war, my mother was born there and I have lived on the other side of the Marnixstraat for 29 years, near the Haarlemmerpoort and our daughter was born there.

Because I spent a lot of time on the Marnixstraat, consciously, I feel more and more at home and at ease. And I do feel the difference between one part of the street and the other.

The sky and the earth.

The earth is important but you may not forget the sky.

The street is ours, with or without a residence permit.

Not of the tourists or the money.

The tourists are welcome, but they are not what it is all about.

I want to touch the street and sit and lie on it as if I were on the beach or in the dunes or on the grass. It is not possible on the road where the cars and scooters and bikes are, but you can on the sidewalks.

Meanwhile I am making things of grass. Grass is an easier material than SAND, my first love and SEA.

It started with the meadow, the green island between Petten and Camperduin where I would go camping after having been months at the beach and the dunes; it was because of the classical image of the cows, the meadow and the mill.

And after that because of the trip back to Amsterdam, lovely fresh from Petten to Alkmaar.

Grass interests me. It grows almost everywhere and always, sometimes they are weeds and sometimes a lawn or a football pitch. Horses are addicted to grass.

The things I make of grass I leave behind at another place than where I picked the grass. There is no clear rule. It is about the ordinary, the normality of grass, about bringing the outside in.

Grass is especially attractive to me when it is still fresh and green. After that it quickly loses its charm. It is the aliveness that makes it fun to do something with and also to leave it behind because then it still totally refers to grass as it is.

When I know a little more about what I want to do with the photos I make of the grass I would like to show them to you,

All disco, sylvia van den ouwelant

Letter to the four men of a pizzeria in Venice we frequented with a group of the Rietveld Academy

Dear men of Al Redentor,

I send you the pictures I made of you last week.

I knew immediately when I saw you I wanted to make pictures of you. For four people to put a meal on the table for 50 people at the same time is no small change.

It was a party to see how you worked together as one man.

And despite the hard work you remained affable, even to me, the troublesome mamarazzi.

Thank you for allowing me to make photos and I hope in the future there will be more inhabitants and less tourists (but enough for Al Redentor).
Many regards from Amsterdam, we also have too many tourists,
Sylvia van den Ouwelant

Notes. On the go to the Venice biennale

Germany, youth hostel, second day, early in the morning. A few men are walking here, they are Poles working here in the neighbourhood and then returning home. Yesterday night, when we arrived: these girls in too chilly, in tank tops and with make-up. I saw it was different but I did not understand what they were doing.

What does it cost, a youth hostel; it is not so bad to stay here. Interesting, like this, I could travel in winter as well. I am going to have a look outside. The most important thing now is to keep it in the moment, especially my own moment, which is difficult in a group. Martien and I are eating separately. The coffee is finished. I do not dare to say it to the woman with the shower cap. Very high trees, a trajectory to go high along the trees, I do not know what they call it. The woman is filling the coffee machine. It is too heavy to fill it all at once she says. 'Alles was full ist, ist schwer', she says. She is me with a shower cap. It is much better here during the day than in the evening.

A building with a clear function. A campsite in the form of a building. The Polish men are gradually going about their jobs, they all take a banana. Apparently that is allowed, the sandwiches you cannot take for lunch the woman said. I believe she also said you can buy them from her but I did not understand it well.

When I write I make a circle around me, a little circle.

This can also be your life. Coming from Poland to work for a few weeks in Germany. Or taking care of the breakfast in a youth hostel. Or being a prostitute in a hostel. And for now it is not a documentary.

Ha Martien,

You also get used to not having a plan, every time I come home after a tour I have difficulties to get back into line again. Then you have to eat, talk, deliberate; I feel myself turning into the grooves of habit and becoming angry at whoever is standing in my way. But that is normal life. After a while I am used to it again and I feel scared to leave all alone. But I do go.

Being together is addictive, being alone is also addictive. The variation seems healthy, when you have a choice.

A swimming pool, too cramped, yoga lesson, nothing in a group anymore. I try not to use the word 'learning' anymore. I do not believe anymore in the linear, in rewards and doing your best.

As a Buddhist of course I was very sensitive to that; reincarnation! But away with it! To deliberate in a group, please never again. I am not able to and I do not want to.

But being a bit social is still desirable. Otherwise I get into trouble and also I do not want to hurt anybody.

Otherwise it is of course also our adventure and this has already been the case for 30 years.

x

Dear Rousseau,

When we met each other this summer during your walks at the Ile de Saint Pierre in Switzerland and my tours along the coast of Noord-Holland, you have inspired and maybe also influenced me with your funny grumblings about other people and how they double-crossed you. I also often have problems with other people, actually I am often afraid of them, but you don't really see that because I fight back so quickly that people are also afraid of me.

I say 'funny', not because I do not take your problems seriously, but because you never say anything about your part in the situation. I think you are also not very easy.

You are writing: *'the source of all happiness is situated in ourselves and it is not in the power of people to make someone really unhappy who has the determination to be happy'*.

I think you are touching upon something important there. In a society like ours, where we don't live in big, cozy families but where it is every man for himself, and not even a god for us all, it is so important to know what you want yourself.

You also write about a strong desire for loneliness you have, because you want to pull out all the stops to know how you can put your 'heart' in the state in which you want it to be at the moment of death. I also have felt this summer it is necessary to be alone to know anything at all about what moves me.

As you say: their philosophy is for others, I need one for myself. I do not think everyone wants to live on the razor's edge nor do they have a longing for that, but we do. I am very happy I met you. You supported me in the idea that, to really give yourself the possibility to become free of yourself, you should not always bind yourself with others. I do not even know if you have studied Buddhism, I am really curious to know what you think about it, but for me, it was, in the end, not the right way. Because, although you get to know yourself while there are no people around, in contact with other people you always have to think about their wellbeing, because in Buddhism that is inherently the be all and end all. To keep together a group of people it can work but on an individual level it can turn out differently.

You also mention you are looking for a regular rule of conduct for the rest of your life. I agree, conduct is something different than conviction.

Actually it is very easy to have a few rules and then follow them and eventually adjust them when they are not right at some point. Although until now I have not had to change anything in the rules of conduct of my manifest that, at the beginning of my tour, strangely, came off the top of my head. *On my bike*, outdoors, fast enough, but not too fast to see a lot around, *alone*, I wrote you already about this above, *as much as possible without a goal and to places I don't know yet*; to be able to make every tour as fresh as possible without already knowing what will come out and the last sentence is not really

a rule but more a desired outcome:

To be as receptive as possible for reality.

And that is how it actually works.

What I did not know, when I wrote my manifest and before I had read the descriptions of your thoughts during your walks, was, that I also want to get rid of all the pressure of everything that is a must. That I do not have to think all the time, is it me when I do not like the things other people like, and the other way around, but that it is what it is and that I sometimes have to adapt, because there is no other possibility, but a lot less than I am used to.

But the most beautiful thing you have given me, was the part you wrote during your fifth walk and that I read when I, in my sixth garden, became totally strange from all the choices I could make to amuse myself. You were writing about musing, dreaming, doing nothing, and that this was the best thing one could do in his life. Not ever before had someone said that to me, nor did I invent it myself. I still have a problem with it, but I practice in doing nothing from then on.

Before I end this letter, dear Rousseau, I want to let you read two little pieces, from Giorgio Agamben and from Henri Bergson.

I find the thoughts of Henri Bergson so moving and true and real, he has spent his whole life on 'studying' the time that has nothing to do with the clock. I have written down a few beautiful sentences, of which I think you will like them as well. *

Agamben is an Italian philosopher (in the bookshop they put his books on the shelf : *political science*) and pretty unruly just as we do, and he writes about the heart, the core, the essence , as you see, it takes an effort to find the right word for this. You call it '*the inner*' *the internal*, which I like a lot because it directly addresses your own body. He calls it '*your own genius*' and that you '*have to come towards that genius in everything*' because '*his happiness is our happiness*' and that '*when you neglect him you are cheating on yourself*'. (The whole piece also below **)

Let us never stop doing this, it is the truth, alone but not lonely!

End

*Henri Bergson,

A few sentences I like a lot:

'Our memory doesn't know physical time or clock time. The time as duration (that is the term Bergson uses for the time that is not clock time) will be experienced when the human being indulges in his intuition.

Sympathy with which one moves in the heart of an object to coincide with makes it unique and therefore inexpressible.

** Giorgio Agamben , profanations page 8 and 9

A Latin phrase perfectly expresses the secret relationship each person must maintain with

his own Genius: indulgere genio. One must consent to Genius and abandon oneself to him; one must grant him everything he asks for, for his exigencies are our exigencies, his happiness our happiness. Even if his - our! - requirements seem treasonable and capricious, it is best to accept them without argument. If in order to write you need - he needs! - a certain light yellow paper, a certain special pen, a certain light shining from the left, it is useless to tell yourself that just any pen will do, that any paper and any light will suffice. If life is not worth living without that light blue linen shirt (for goodness' sake, not the white one with the collar of an office worker!), if without those long cigarettes with black paper you just don't see any reason to go on, then there's no point in repeating to yourself that these are no more than little manias, that now is the time to be over and done with them. In Latin, Genium suum defraudare, to defraud one's own genius, means to make one's life miserable, to cheat oneself, in Latin. But the life that turns away from death and responds without hesitation to the impetus of the genius that engendered it is called genialis, genial. But this most intimate and personal god is also that which is most impersonal in us; it is the personalization of what, in us, goes beyond and exceeds us. "Genius is our life not insofar as it was originated by us, but rather insofar as we originate from it"

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Zijdelveld 56, Uithoorn
Wethouder Doevestraat 3, Halfweg
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Badweg 40, Ijmuiden
Jobs Landje, duinen van Egmond aan zee
Strandweg 3, Petten
Houtendijk 9, Schoorl
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Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), reveries of a solitary walker
(Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire 1778)
Joke Hermsen (1961), stil de tijd, (2011) (a.o. texts of Henri Bergson 1859-1941)
Nescio (1882-1961), natuurdagboek(1996)
Giorgio Agamben (1942), profanations 2015 (2005. *Profanazioni*)
Chogyam Trungpa (1939-1987), cutting through spiritual materialism (19..)
Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, as it is (1995)
Theo Thijssen (1879-1943), All books