

Dutch Don't Dance



ASPECT / RATIO
December 13, 2013 - January, 25 2014



Maria Pask

Déjà Vu,

Single channel video, 72min, 2010

***“The Dutch Don’t Dance, The Dutch Don’t Dance,
There are a few who do, Just a few and if they do,
It gets too much for the other Dutch...”***

Dutch Don’t Dance an exhibit of Dutch video art at Chicago’s West Loop gallery, *Aspect/Ratio*, is inspired by the above phrase from Annie M.G. Schmidt’s Dutch children’s books. Curators, Kirsten Leenars and Jeroen Nelemans, two Dutch artists based in Chicago, invited two artists working in the Netherlands, Hedwig Houben and Maria Pask, to present their moving image work at *Aspect/Ratio*.

In their curatorial statement, Leenars and Nelemans, who address Dutch themes within their own work, clarify their playfully ironic approach to the show:

The work in this show counters a Calvinistic way of thinking, pushing the paradoxical proverb: don't stand out; acting normal is already crazy enough. Dutch social interactions often revolve around a gathering consensus on the definition of a given situation or opinion. 'Standing out', or disruptions tend to be avoided. Maria Pask and Hedwig Houben throw the nature of these social situations and cultural conventions into doubt. Both artists place interruptions into the everyday and anticipate its potential for absurdity, between the established relationships between artists and their works, and between the performer and the audience and what is expected.

“For [us] it was important to have at least one video that incorporated the Dutch language. Hedwig not only spoke Dutch, but it was her voice that captivated me. Her voice, for me, accentuated the visuals of the video,

which shows a fine line between sincerity and cajoling.” (Jeroen Nelemans)

The show's installation also engaged symbols of Dutch culture: “I found these sound absorbing foam mats, which conveniently came in orange [the color of Dutch royalty]. We hung them at shoulder level, inviting the viewer to lean on... But I also liked the idea of having a couple of these hanging throughout the gallery as an additional aesthetic component.” (Jeroen Nelemans)

The show continues *Aspect/Ratio's* commitment to highlighting contemporary and global video art for a Chicago audience. The gallery's name emphasizes the technological properties of video art, such as 4:3 and 16:9, and importantly initiates a conversation on how to display and incorporate video into an art collection. The gallery director, Jefferson Godard, wants *Aspect/Ratio*, “[to] increase the visibility for artists that work primarily in video.”

– Sjoukje van der Meulen

Hedwig Houben's, *Personal Matters and Matters of Fact* (2011), and Maria Pask's, *Déjà vu* (2012), are two pieces which can be described as different kinds of performance art, which are shot on video or film and then shown in art spaces in various ways, sometimes as part of an installation (Pask), sometimes even as a public lecture (Houben).

Pask's film, *Déjà vu*, is composed of dramatic episodes in the format of a soap opera on the community life in Rose Hill, an estate in Oxford. Recognized for her collaborative and community-based work, the film was commissioned by the Modern Art Oxford gallery for their 'Art in Rose Hill' program, in which contemporary artists are being invited to work closely with the estate's community. The episodes of the film are "re-imaginings of real-life events," which are all triggered by the *Roundabout*, a local newsletter that the Pask discovered in a local Oxford library.

Pask is primarily interested in the avant-garde movements within modernism, especially as they relate to experimental theatre. And in what took place in the interim periods or the periphery of the modernist movement, such as the arts and crafts movement, or the work of women at the Bauhaus. Still, she shares a modernist self-critical approach toward performance art with her younger peer in *Dutch don't Dance*, Hedwig Houben. Both artists experiment with different forms of interdisciplinary performance art in a time of wide variety of other media. In this sense, they are both representative of the typical experimental culture that marks contemporary art from the Netherlands. Houben, however, seems more focused on a consistently self-critical and reflexive process toward her work and her working methods in the modernist tradition.

A conversation was had with both artists in January of 2014. Maria Pask was interviewed in her Amsterdam–Nord studio. Hedwig Houben was interviewed in Brussels. Below are excerpts of my conversations with the artists, starting with a question to Pask about her title *Déjà Vu*:

Maria Pask: '*Déjà Vu* literally means 'already seen.' I wanted to make direct reference to the original *Roundabout*, which was published from 1957 until 1969. They write about youth hanging around in the area, petty theft, and other social issues that the residents had problems with. I realized that this community journal could also be of today, because the area still faces problems, and the current residents complain about similar things: drunken young men, unemployment, petty vandalism, etc. That's why I called it *Déjà Vu*. A difference is that the original community was very optimistic. The *Roundabout* encouraged community life and tried to engage people in political and social discussions. The same place in 2007 — when I made the film — is going through a regeneration scheme. It is a quite a depressed area now. I wanted to remind people of the possibility of a more positive approach as well. So, the title directly refers to the place and context of Rose Hill, but we also played on the idea of *recurrence* formally. Together with Maarten Theuwkens, who filmed and edited the film, I experimented with recurring scenarios and themes. As you can see in the film, we used this technique of repetition in various ways.'

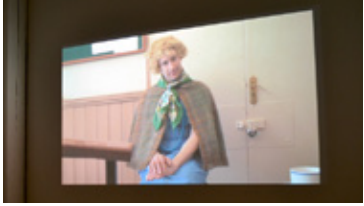
Sjoukje van der Meulen: Let's talk about the content of the work. You touch upon social issues in your work. Even though you use a lot of humor and irony, you seem to critically address these topics. I am thinking of the scene about the insanely fertilized food, which produces these captivating and humorous giant vegetables, or the idea that individualized society has gone too far... Do you intend to question such and other issues in your work?





MP: 'I have a complete scene list of the film, there are about thirty in total. Each scene is an interpretation of a specific topic, story, or commentary that was written about, or being discussed in the *Roundabout*, some direct, some more abstract. The first scene relates to a report in the newsletter of June 1954, which describes the visit of the Bishop of Dorchester to Rose Hill, who delivered a talk about the high illegitimacy rate in Oxford. The film is *that* specific. I would contrast this with a more abstract scene; for example, a scene in which nothing happens except for a piece of dust floating around. This is based on an excerpt of 1964, which tells about the Spring-cleansing of the Rose Hill community. There is also a scene about a fashion show, which is also talked about in the *Round About*. Mark Spencer organized the show with dresses, suits and sportswear of a quality that would have been too expensive for the community. Still, the event had an impact on their social life. Then there is another scene on the threat of communism and the nuclear arms race; a discussion about the reason why people prefer Brigitte Bardot to the Mona Lisa, and one about the negative influence of television, which could be related to the Internet today. The scenes range from social issues to community feelings, and they all relate to how the Rose Hill community is trying to survive, to make things work, to make things better. The role of community art comes in, and of artists working in the community. That's often not seen as valid, at least not from an art point of view.'

SvdM: The scene with the fashion show is hilarious! To be honest, I read it as an implicit critique on the whole fashion industry. That is why I asked about the criticality in your work. I am also interested in how this critical subtext affects the spectator. In his essay "The Emancipated Spectator," Jacques Rancière draws a distinction between the active and the passive spectator. What is your take on the spectator or audience?



MP: 'The audience should not be consumed by what they are seeing; my work is not a spectacle. I want people to think a bit; I don't want them to accept the performance as a given. Just because the audience sits on a chair, does not mean that it should be passive. Their minds can be activated, become aware, and feel engaged. My work involves both professional actors and local people. The roles of the actor and spectator are not always distinct. I use techniques to keep the performers active during the shooting of the film. I have a very good cameraman, who comes from the commercial field, and can handle improvised situations, in which you do not always know exactly how things will develop. I often let the camera look out for where the action is, or go to places where action could be. I get a lot of commissions from art places that ask me literally to engage the audience into the performance. On the flip side of that is that this can cause a lot of contention. I prefer situations where you do not have to reach a consensus, in which you can accept people's differences. I find it important to open spectators and performers up to an artistic experience. I am less interested in creating social experiences like relational artists do. I am rather into the collective creation process. That's my way of seeing and doing things.'



SvdM: For the reading group at Stroom Den Haag (2012), you assigned Rosalind Krauss's essay, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." The idea of sculpture in the expanded field seems quite applicable to your work as it can be considered as performance in the expanded field. Just like sculpture in the 1970s, your work moves beyond the boundaries of disciplinary lines, including performance art, television, video, film, and experimental theatre. Do you agree with this?

MP: 'I was asked by Stroom to led a reading group in order to explore what performance art means to artists, curators, and the general public today. We used Krauss's text about expanded sculpture as a conversation starter. Then we looked at other texts, which had similar topics related to performance; texts that are trying to define new ways of looking at performance. Krauss begins her text with questioning what we know about sculpture in the present-day, how it has changed, and how difficult it has become to give a proper definition of the medium. My own work has certainly to do with diversity, with a wide range of performative forms. That's why I am interested in stepping over conventional definitions of performance art; question what it exactly is, and how I can locate my own work. I am interested in all the things you mention: performance art, television, film, and theatre. I just find it difficult to think in a classic box. What I like about popular television formats, such as soap operas, comedy programs or kids TV, is their amateuristic quality. And television pushes the excepted notions of art. I find 'Art' quite hierarchical, with a rigid idea about what it should and should not be. I have not resolved the question of art's autonomous nature, but I prefer not to categorize it. I do like to play with expectations of what art is. But it is not that blatant in my work. There is a huge amount of experimentation in *Déjà Vu*: I purposely did not give much time to things, the performers did not have any time to rehearse; they had to react on the spur of the moment. The film is scripted, in the sense that I provide a basic structure for each scene, but it is also to a large extent unplanned; it is not so formulaic. The film turned into a highly improvised, seemingly random, and energetic performance. All of this relates back to Bertolt Brecht, and Dada, and a lot of other types of experimental theatre throughout the 20th century.'





Houben's video, *Personal Matters and Matters of Fact* (2011), is a performance shot in the intimate space of her studio, where she set up a conversation between herself, a self-portrait, and a copy of a Rietveld chair about deep artistic and philosophical questions from a personal viewpoint.

SvdM: The video you show in Chicago is *Personal Matters and Matters of Fact* (2011). Based on this and other work, I get the impression that you are interested in everything around sculpture, the conditions of sculpture, the sculptural form, the material and the performative aspects of sculpture, but perhaps less in the sculpture itself. Is this right?

HH: 'I do raise a variety of questions 'around' sculpture, but still it's not just a formal investigation. For example, in *Colours and Shapes, A Short Explanation of My Artistic Practice*, I create five characters from basic geometric shapes – the cube, the sphere, the pyramid, the cylinder and the cone – with which I enter into a dialogue. I read a lot on the Montessori education and its pedagogical teaching methods, which involve objects: children learn the world through objects – through experiences with concrete objects the child discovers abstract concepts and relations. I think that is what I try to do in my studio as well. In the just-said work, I explain my artistic practice through these five different shapes, which appear as characters that discuss certain topics of colors and shape. But nothing is fixed; everything can be changed during the process of creation. I would say I am interested in the learning insights and the decision process that come with the making of a sculpture. So, yes, probably I am interested in everything except for the final object.'

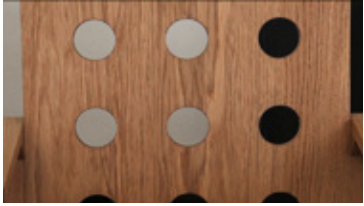
Hedwig Houben

Personal Matters & Matters of Fact, Single channel video, 22min, 2011



SvdM: The modernist tradition comes to my mind because you are not so much interested in subject matter but rather in matters of colors and forms. In modernist terms, the investigative process that you describe concerning your artistic practice can be called ‘self-critical’ or even ‘reflexive.’ Are you aware of this modernist subtext of your work?

HH: ‘That’s a very difficult question! I often feel a bit uncomfortable when I am asked about such big topics. But my performance-lecture series, *Five Possible Lectures on Six Possibilities for a Sculpture*, is very reflective. It started as a self-reflective process in my studio. I was captivated by a certain object, I was just trying to make it work, but I failed. Then I thought: ‘Maybe, if I do it all over again, it might work.’ I am always attracted to the process of making, but sometimes the maker inside of me loses herself and wants to redo an object over and over again. I might end up with six copies of the same thing, without a good concept or convincing reason behind it. I try to incorporate all my deliberations, all my doubts, all my insecurities, all my mistakes into my work, even if they are embarrassing. This studio experience triggered *Five Lectures for Six Possibilities of a Sculpture*. In the first lecture, I was really into the original object and the history of that object, but as the performance series developed – in which I, each time, shape an object from plasticine on stage while reflecting on it aloud – I began to explore the possibilities of what its different variants could be, its ‘copies.’ I am really not just interested in formal issues, but also in the human aspect of making, including the psychological dimension of it. I am not an art historian, but if I would relate my own work to modernism, then that is where I think it might differ from modernist concerns: the focus on these humane aspects instead of the object. At the same time the work can also be seen as an ode to abstraction.’



SvdM: There is a subtle kind of humor in your work, which emerges from the intimate dialogue that you set up between you and your objects — you almost treat them as human beings sometimes. What can you say about the role of humor in your work? How do you use it?



HH: 'Of course, I am aware that I use humor in my work. For example, the lecture *Six Possibilities for a Sculpture...* is given from the perspective of the sculpture. That's a bit funny, a bit absurd. Despite this ridiculousness, I give my talk in a serious and deadpan manner; you cannot see that I am playing this comical role. That kind of friction is quite important in my work. I am not joking obviously. I also do not force a pun onto the work; it just appears naturally. In *Personal Matters and Matters of Fact*, there is this rather odd moment when I wrench the bust through one of the holes in the back of the chair. This was an obvious thing for me to do. Then the chair 'responds' in its ironic way, "Come on, everyone knows this is fake," thus questioning the fact that with film and video, you can manipulate everything through editing. The whole scene turns out quite comically, but in my studio these things just pop up in my mind as I am writing the script or doing and recording the performance. The humor is really important, though. To come back to your question about modernism, the humor plays a role in the whole reflective process on the [modernist] questions of original and copy that are being discussed in the conversation.'



For me it's no problem. Let's see how it goes. I like the experiment!



Slightly fake.

SvdM: The Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin has written about the dialogical form. He contrasts this with the narrative form. Within the narrative form, the character has to fit into the story, but in a dialogical form — which he relates to Dostoyevsky — the characters get more space to develop in their own way, they develop more autonomously. Given the dialogical nature of your work, that is, the dialogues you set up between you and your characters, I wonder whether you feel related to Bakhtin's concept.

HH: 'His idea of the dialogical form sounds interesting. I do think it is close to the way in which I am working. I do not have a fixed idea of the characters beforehand. I have some idea about the characters, but during the performance the characters do take over a bit. It really *is* a dialogue, which is why I say everything can change... I might project a certain trait onto a character, but sometimes it does not want to be like that, and develops in another direction. In the dialogue between the self-portrait and the chair, I at first thought that the self-portrait would be a rather conservative character, and that it would constantly talk from that perspective. And I thought of the Rietveld chair as somewhere between the traditional and the modern, as it was a progressive at its time, and yet it also already belongs to art history. In the dialogue between the bust, the chair, and myself things turned out very differently: the self-portrait began conservative but became more progressive along the way, while the chair unexpectedly acted quite stubborn. And I, the contemporary artist, was trying to mediate the views of these two character objects. I am interested in how things acquire meaning, and what we can do to change that meaning.

SvdM: Looking at your videos, I had to think about conceptual art in general, and the work of Sol LeWitt in particular, such as *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes* (1974) or *Five Open Geometric Structures* (1979), in both of which he plays out the relationship between logic and illogic. Do you feel connected with LeWitt and conceptual art?

HH: 'Yes, but perhaps more with John Baldessari. There is a work of Baldessari called *Carrots* (1972), in which he asks to choose between two carrots. Then the finest carrot is advanced to the next round and compared against two other carrots, and so on and so forth. It doesn't really matter which carrot the participants choose — it is a kind of ridiculous question to begin with. I like the humor of his conceptual work, and the playfulness with which the artist addresses the, for me, crucial question of artistic choice. I also like the work in which Baldessari sings Sol LeWitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1972), a long list of 35 rules for conceptual art. Before Baldessari starts to sing, he says that he believes that these sentences did not get enough attention. By singing them, he hopes to bring them to a larger public. Like LeWitt, I am interested in the tangled knot of logic and illogic. In *About the Good and the Bad Sculpture*, for example, I am discussing the difference between a good-looking sculptural form and an unsuccessful one, which I find a pointless issue in art; that's why I question it. The video starts logically by comparing the two kinds of sculpture, but soon it becomes ambiguous which one is 'good' and which one 'bad'. My work often begins clear, but at a certain point things become blurry.'



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