

**ARTISTIC RESEARCH**  
**(Leerlijn Theorie in de Kunsten)**

**BY**

**NINA MEIJER**

**ON**

**THE SENSITIVITY OF MAN TOWARDS DIFFERENT KINDS OF  
SPACES AND THE IMPORTANCE OF USING A POETIC LANGUAGE  
IN DESCRIBING SPATIAL EXPERIENCES**

**FINISHED AROUND**

**MARCH 2017**

# CONTENTS

## **1 Problematique**

**2 Ton Lemaire vs. Édouard Glissant: the emotional bond of the localised human with his surroundings and the relational identity of the nomad**

**3 Arnold Aronson vs. William Kentridge: the fusion of reality and illusion in live stage performance and the disrupting language in the multimedia work by W. Kentridge**

**4 Peter Sonderen vs. Marina Abramovic and Guido van de Werve: on the role of the body in performing arts, zooming in on the different intentions (symbolic and poetic) of the two artists**

**5 *The Red Turtle* vs. Joost Zwagerman: an evasive visual poetics and an adequate written poetics**

**6 Gaston Bachelard vs. Sarah Bennett, Mirja Hiltunen and Mark Dawes: home as man's ultimate refuge vs. establishing a commune spirit through art**

# 1. Problematique

Some days I feel only a very thin border between me and everything that surrounds me; impressions almost violently enter my awareness, which can make those days an exhausting experience. I long for a very quiet, empty and balanced place. Or to roam for such a distance that the stinging impressions become easy, floating appearances; already left behind at the moment they come into view.

At the same time however, I project much of my inner being into a space. There is a strong emotional interaction between certain places and my entity. A place can be either very safe, unsafe, hostile, comforting, sheltering, suffocating, sad, home, or everything at the same time.

As a consequence, my studio is the one place where I feel most comfortable, surrounded by my works and the people who speak my language. A great *comfort*; troost.

I am interested in seeking or composing this comfort in space; creating a 'spatial narrative'; the entity that is me and the space in in calm conversation.

Maybe the search is for something called a 'poetic space'. This is a term introduced and investigated by Gaston Bachelard in his book *the poetics of space*. The chapters are called "Nests", "Shells", "Drawers, Chests and Wardrobes". There is a very intimate, almost magical connotation attached to certain retreats like these, as are often mentioned in folk tales: castles, attics, cellars, gardens, huts in the forest, the lonely house on the moor. Bachelard promotes the advantages of speaking in *poetics* rather than approaching the resonance of space through psychoanalysis: "by going immediately *beyond* all psychology or psychoanalysis, we feel a poetic power rising naïvely within us."

When encountering a certain small, intimate space (such as a waiting room or a theatre), there is an intuitive reaction, says philosopher Ton Lemaire. He makes the distinction between the 'official, geographical space', which has a more functional orientation, and space as it is experienced in our youth, with these exact emotional connotations that Bachelard focuses on. Lemaire's book, *Filosofie van het Landschap*, is a plea to rediscover this 'true' experience of space. He draws on how a space makes us what we are, on a very individual and personal level, as much as we create the space:

"In onze jeugd begint dan ook die subtiele wederzijdse doordringing van mens en landschap waardoor wij een gedeelte van ons wezen aan dit landschap toevertrouwen en onszelf in de ruimte om ons heen kunnen investeren."

Where does the narrative enter the space?

The landscape has always played a dominant part in my work. Recently however, the role of *a subject* in my work has grown. Specifically, the subject relating to the surroundings.

Instead of picturing the mere landscape, the focus has turned to a person's presence in it; a dialogue. But what does the presence of the body, and the action it performs imply?

Peter Sonderen has investigated this in his essay *Performing arts and fine art: busy with bodies. What body?* Performativity is 'explicitly connected to *action*, to working in reality'. But how then, Sonderen questions, is performativity connected to the body?

The interest in performativity arose with new movements such as Fluxus, Dada, action painting, and groups such as the Wiener Aktionisten etc. In short: the body is essential and therefore "the act is central not the reference to something else." Distinctions between subject and object, representation and presentation become unclear.

I've been working on constructing scenic spaces both in and outside of my studio. These are two different things, for the work I make outside of the studio only remains as documentation of the scene I created in the past. Yet the construction in my studio is a constructed, transforming *mise-en scène*. They speak two languages. This is dealt with by Arnold Aronson in his collection of essays *Looking into the Abyss; essays on scenography*. When talking about the use of video and projection in the play, he is sceptical. Because the projection and the live actors onstage occupy a different temporality, the combination is clashing. The video

is detached from its space and time. It is important therefore, he states, to implement a transition in the work. While the content may be determined by the artist, the process of viewing and taking in information is up to the spectator. A very interesting example is Gertrude Stein, who made a number of plays that she called landscape drama's. These plays are characterised by the absence of narrative and derive on relationships. Compare it to a landscape, where the trees are always relating to the hills and the sky and the scattered creatures passing through.

What happens here is that the sequence, the linear story is replaced by a more meditative approach. Rather than the performance talking a monologue, there literally is time and space for the spectator to respond; a dialogue between audience and the *mise-en-scène*.

The research is now covering multiple areas; scenography as a means to compose a spatial narrative, Bachelard and Lemaire investigating the experience of this spatiality (particularly the landscape), Sonderer discussing the role of the subject and the border between life and art; what finally remains, is the "emotion". A very broad and unclear term. As mentioned before, I do not mean to dig into this on a psychological or architectural level; rather, to seek examples where emotion is embroidered into space the way light is. Someone that I find is very good at this, is the author and poet Joost Zwagerman. In his book *De stilte van het licht* he considers many artworks and talks about them in a highly personal and associative manner. He uses language a bit like Bachelard does; the reviews are very sensory. I think it is important to stay in this frame of mind in order to grasp a bit of the very intuitive character of my works.

An example that came to mind is the recent animation *The Red Turtle* (2016) by Michael Dudok de Wit. Here I find that the environment in which the story takes place, is not a mere 'passive' background, but rather an actor itself, maybe even the main character. Not a word is said during the entire film; however, there is plenty of communication, and a very direct conversation between the small family and the island it occupies.

To conclude the problematique:

How is space related to our emotional life, our imagination and our identity? What is the difference between a borderless natural landscape and an intimate *mise-en-scène* in this? And, finally, in what different (visual) poetic languages can space best be depicted or described?

In order to research this subject, I wish not to move into a psychological area or dive into architectural theories, but rather address the poetics and sensibility of space, by looking closer at certain fine artist and analysing poets, philosophers and art theoreticians.

# 1

Ton Lemaire: *Filosofie van het Landschap*

Édouard Glissant: *Poetics of Relation*

Paulo Coelho: *The Alchemist*

Lemaire's subject is the landscape, which he regards from many a point of view. He has much attention for the inner world of mankind that reflects back in our approach of the landscape. The way the landscape manifests itself in art throughout history can be traced back to the believe in a mystic world, the desire for expansion, Romantic values, an observing Zeitgeist that tries to fathom the underlying processes, the dive into the surrealism of man's psychology. In other words, the landscape has many dimensions aside from the geographical one, and our approach towards it corresponds to the apprehension of ourselves.

Lemaire continues to decipher this through questioning the philosophical value of a horizon, a ruin, a viewpoint. And what does it mean to travel?

The main subject though that arises from the book is the current psychological split of mankind, who is, on the one hand, very busy to demystify its own environment; to frame the world in empiric theory (from quantum physics to the chance that we are living in a mere simulation). On the other hand however, we have a tendency to seek our lost mystification in the places we occupy, our direct surroundings. We invest ourselves emotionally in our house, in the daily walk we make in the neighbourhood around it. "Kortom, hoe zo te leven dat men profiteert van de mogelijkheden van de universele ruimte zonder ontheemd te raken, dus zonder het middelpunt te verliezen waarin men zijn ervaringen, herinneringen en gedachten verzamelt?"

Lemaire shows throughout the book how the landscape essentially shows the contradictory nature of modern time. There is the natural-scientific frame of mind, which implies an objective approach to the earth in order to use it accordingly, and the more aesthetic approach, which provides the emotional compensation to the one-sided mechanical understanding of our world. Our culture has replaced the vegetal with the thing as a basis for our conscience. The word landscape contains both; the accomplishments of modern society and the price we pay for it.

In the chapter called *het landschap van de prehistorie* the author considers the implications of trading a nomadic life to an agricultural one:

*De oudheidkundige vondst onthult ons dat we slechts toevallige en voorbijgaande bewoners zijn van het landschap waarin we leven en waaraan we zo gehecht zijn, dat we moeite hebben om het ons voor te stellen zonder onszelf. We worden ons bewust van onze gehechtheid aan de ruimte waarin onze jeugd, ons leven zich afspeelt, wellicht wel een van de meest noodzakelijke en subtiele middelen is van de cultuur om zich in de natuur te handhaven. Het is een minstens even belangrijke bijdrage tot het behoud van het leven om zich emotioneel met een ruimte verbonden te voelen als om haar in vruchtbare akkers te veranderen. (...) Alles in ons vraagt dat de natuur ons niet ontkent en negeert, maar ons herbergt door een universum naar onze maat te willen zijn.*

Yet, Lemaire shows, to be aware of how and where one's living, is to become detached from it.

*"nadenken over wonen betekent van het hechte, onmiddellijke wonen al vervreemd zijn maar zich achteraf rekenschap geven van deze vorm van wonen en van alle andere, zonder overigens het verlangen te kunnen onderdrukken de oorspronkelijke bewoning ooit weer te gaan bewonen. Door deze mythische inslag betekent de menige reflectie op het wonen een protest tegen de ontmythologisering van de ruimte, een poging tot hermythologisering van het landschap en het huis."*

But how can we come to this mythological house and environment? Lemaire points to Heidegger: "Het wezen openbaart zich pas aan wie zich ontvankelijk openstelt voor iets, het in dankbaarheid probeert te bedenken, het benadert langs voetpaden en niet over de grote snelweg. (...) Want de mens is nu eenmaal gelokaliseerd, ondanks zijn huidige mobiliteit; door te gaan wandelen geeft hij te kennen dat hij gelokaliseerd wil zijn en de dimensies van zijn locus wil verkennen."

At this point, Lemaire speaks the words of Bachelard; what the house essentially does, is to provide a space for the human being to collect itself, it's thoughts, dreams and memories.

To inhabit, also means to have habits. "(...) het is juist door deze gewoonten dat hij zich in de wereld kan installeren en zich thuis kan voelen: hij is 'bij zichzelf' (chez soi) doordat hij woont in de herhaling van zijn gewoonten."

This investment of one's affection and moods over a period of time creates a bonding; to love. An exchange between the individual and its direct surroundings, where the 'I' can be found in all things present.

Homesickness is almost an instinctive reaction to return to one's home.

"Het landschap fungeert daarbij als concreet middel om de totaliteit van een bestaan uit te drukken en tevens zijn begrenzing."

As Nietzsche said, the only nature we know is a thoroughly *vermenschlichte* nature. The text by Lemaire, though appointed from diverse angles, is also focusing mostly on the *settlement* of man in his/her environment: "*Alles in ons vraagt dat de natuur ons niet ontkent en negeert, maar ons herbergt door een universum naar onze maat te willen zijn.*" Landscape as he describes it, therefore, says in my opinion more about traits of humankind (habits, cultivation, valuation) than 'indifferent' nature.

My point is that Lemaire is talking about the role of landscape for the 'rooted' man; what the relation of the errant or exiled man is with his/her environment, is not addressed. Even the chapter concerning travelling focuses on the 'leaving-behind' of home. I wonder; does the nomad equally desire to be 'recognised' by nature?

In the *Poetics of Relation* Édouard Glissant defines what is called *root identity*, and proposes a *relation identity* in its stead. Root identity, already criticized by Deleuze and Guattari, is characterised as totalitarian: it only refers to itself, the single, unique, mythical root. Glissant continues with his *Poetics of Relation* upon the notion of the *rhizome*, introduced by Guattari and Deleuze. Rhizomatic thought is connected with network, anti-conformism, the denial of a universal model, and challenges the single-rootedness.

Where Lemaire describes the manner in which we not only extract resources from our environment, but also our identity, Glissant is more careful and nuanced. He describes a history of identification with a leader, a culture, a nation. Centres of power declaring themselves in order to seize and colonize the periphery (Glissant calls this arrow-like nomadism, the need for expansion).

"Most of the nations that gained freedom from colonization have tended to form around an idea of power – the totalitarian drive of a single, unique root – rather than around a fundamental relationship with the Other."<sup>1</sup>

The thought of errantry, the desire to go against the root, remains within the sphere of personal adventure. However, when roaming and exile are experienced in search for the Other, these can be considered as new forms of identification that are calling to us (Glissant uses the term circular nomadism). "The thought of errantry is a poetics (...). The tale of errantry is the tale of Relation."<sup>2</sup> Glissant is explaining here how *errantry* reinforces the sense of identity, whereas Lemaire links this to a certain (personal) territory.

How does one derive identity from errantry? How does the nomad identify him/herself, if not by the environment?

Glissant involves Baudelaire, who explored the *Poetics of depth* (like depth psychology). "Inner space is as infinitely explorable as spaces of the earth."<sup>3</sup> However, Baudelaire realised how all his self-knowledge would only matter in relation to others; what he made others know. The Other is in us, affects, influences, shapes. This is why we want to know the Other; since all cultures, lands and people are no longer there to discover, they remain to know. But, Glissant emphasizes, to the extent of no totality (absolute) but that of relatives that are in touch.

---

<sup>1</sup>Glissant, p. 14

<sup>2</sup>P.18

<sup>3</sup>P. 24

Glissant's derives his examples mostly from Caribbean literature, (being partly 'rooted' in Martinique). I however am strongly reminded of *the alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. The main character, 'the boy' already starts out as half a nomad, being a shepherd. He sells his stock in search for a treasure beneath the pyramids in Egypt. Arriving on the African continent, his money is stolen and the boy is left with nothing. He works for a year in a crystals shop where he is able to revitalise the shop and earns back his lost sum of money. There, the choice is either going back to being a shepherd, or to follow his dream. The boy then trades the city for the desert, falls in love in an oasis, but still is able to leave the oasis again.

To cut short; the story contains many dear partings, and what the boy experiences is that each time a door is closed, a new door opens. He comes across new persons, learns about cultures, the nature of people (and alchemy). Also, not unimportant, his thoughts are tested by all these meetings; a wisdom of his own slowly grows in him.

I'd like to try and say this: in order to cultivate one's wisdom, would it not be more prudent to be rooted somewhere, for some time, to invest in and admire a place, *to love it and still be able to walk out* to the next place, knowing this rooting can be accomplished anywhere? To experience different, meaningful *rencontres* throughout a life, to carry a home within oneself, and to carefully tend this inner wisdom that springs from it. Not in the sense of some addiction to always experience something new, to never have lasting friendships, but to have a courage to get lost and to burn bridges. Relational identity as an attitude, a self constructed in relation *to*.

## 2

### Arnold Aronson: *Looking into the abyss: Essays on scenography*

William Kentridge: artist

From the moment we are born, we respond instinctively to space. Each confrontation with a certain space however, is most often felt subconsciously. Aronson researches our reaction to the space of the stage, a potentially unlimited vastness. "The stage, regardless of its configuration, functions as an optical focal point and creates the impression that we are looking through this lens into a boundless space beyond." A huge power he states, that nevertheless is little addressed in play reviews.

But how can the act even be understood separate from the environment in which it takes place and is experienced?

Aronson ponders that theatre is mostly apprehended from a literary point of view, studied primarily through language and concepts. (Despite that, we are still going out 'to see a play'.)

Partly, this can also be related to the cultural divide between high and low art, that assigned spectacle to be popular culture, as opposed to 'high' literary theatre. Décor, lighting and visuals should not stir emotions, but merely function as a support to the play – not compete with it. Here, the old distinction between the realms of 'painting' and 'poetry' is still very much present.

"Scenography, however, is an art of time, motion, action, *and* space, that is, an amalgamation of the two". And they influence each other during the play; movements of live actors transform the space and the visuals, creating *an unstable image*. Some objects for example can only be experienced when manipulated by the live actors; everything becomes a sign.

The *graphy*-part of the word scenography can be understood as *scenic writing*. "It carries a connotation of an all-encompassing visual-spatial construct as well as the process change and transformation that is an inherent part of the physical vocabulary of the stage. In that sense, it bears some relation to the French term *mise en scène*." In other words: scenographic elements include everything from the space to the text to the performer and the audience.

*Looking into the Abyss* is a collection of essays Aronson wrote about several subjects concerning scenography and performative groups, with the emphasis on the visual aspect of theatre. In the likewise-named core essay, he talks about the consequences of the spatio-temporal nature of theatre.

Firstly, there is the *detachment* of the image or space itself from its surroundings, particularly in the case of videoworks onstage. Aronson names the Wooster Group, who are pioneers in experimenting with video: "an attempt to capture multiple times and locations within a single framework or to *re-present the visible image within itself as an act of dislocation through reframing* [cursief NM]". Aronson even goes so far as to say "The Wooster Group acknowledges the shifting aesthetics of our age, in which image and reality are often interchangeable and reality is a phantom idea that is ultimately meaningless."

In another essay (*Can Theatre and Media Speak the Same Language?*), Aronson is sceptic when it comes to using projections on stage: he talks about 'a conversation in two languages', a clash of two realities. Unless the intention is to purposely create a sense of dislocation (such as the Wooster Group's), it doesn't work well, he finds. "(...) content is overwhelmed by form".

He reasons that "Theatre is the only art form to use that which is signified as the signifier of that object" (a table is represented by a table, a vase by a vase etc.). Actual physical objects make up the room, which is directly represented by the three-dimensional stage, while technology such as photography or film is primarily a reordering of perception. The difference is in the presence of space, volume, size, dimensions, and real-time. When film enters the stage, the effect is almost that of a parallel dimension, detached from its immediate surroundings. Like a landscape painting has nothing to do with the wall that it happens to hang on.

However, some pages further: "On the other hand, psychology and its related disciplines suggested an inner reality more ephemeral, less tied to the visible and concrete, and which was thus seen as somehow more truthful." Here it becomes interesting; the visual representation doing suggestions *independently* of the narrative of the play.



Aronson here mentions Gertrude Stein, who proposed the so-called *landscape drama*. A piece based on relations rather than a story.

The landscape is there; not moving but containing elements that are relating to each other all the time; the narrative is replaced by special relations.

It is important to notice here that the temporal dimension is cut loose from the spatiality of the piece: thus, "the parameters and content may be determined by the artist, but the method and organising of viewing and processing information was largely controlled by the spectator. The experience for the spectator became more contemplative or meditative (...) relationships replaced sequences." Theatre presented as an installation.

In the essay *The Art of Transition*, the Rockwell Group is investigated, including projects of interior architecture. David Rockwell uses the scenographic language to move beyond the merely functional and implement the dramatics, narrative and emotional character of theatre design. This is, in fact, an ancient tradition; most of Italian Renaissance designers were architects, and included landscape architectural elements in their scenography. Incorporating natural elements in the artificial space of the stage also creates a confusing notion of illusion and reality.

However, 21st century, in response to the 'form follows function', is characterised by functionalism and minimalism, making any theatrical or decorative elements suspect. Yet again our current culture is made up of increasing visual and electronic media, computer graphics, virtual realities, overwhelming shows, much movement and intense lighting. Everything is designed. Rockwell understands the need for the visitor to meld all these images into a coherent whole, and here lies his interest in theatre-effects: "the initial impact through revelation of space, seduction through the combination of visual iconography and spatial manipulation, and emotional transition or transformation". This is usually achieved by letting the spectator move through the architecture, dissolving the boundary between performativity and spectatorship. More importantly, it implies a shift from focus on the content to emphasis on the structure, making transformation the norm and content the liminal.

Coming back to the notion of *theatre presented as fine art*; can it be the other way around, too? I'd like to review South-African artist William Kentridge in this matter (basing my assumptions mainly on an essay by MOMA NY-curators Cornelia H. Butler, Judith B. Hecker and Klaus Biesenbach, published in the book *William Kentridge: five themes*). Kentridge (1955) is famous for his charcoal drawings, animations, printmaking, sculpture and performance, which he usually throws together in his works. Remarkably, he makes use of many theatrical and mime-like elements, while clearly remaining in the realm of installation art. This follows from his time in Paris in the early 1980'ies, where he attended classes mime and theatre. Though Kentridge's work strongly contains political and postcolonial connotations, due to his background (growing up during the Apartheid), he proclaims that the themes in his work are actually closely connected to his contemplations of life and an historic perspective on society.

However, I'd like to zoom in more closely on the formal use of media by this great artist (a shift from focus on the content to emphasis on the structure...)

First, let me return to Aronson, who makes two, rather bold, statements:

*"The Wooster Group acknowledges the shifting aesthetics of our age, in which image and reality are often interchangeable and reality is a phantom idea that is ultimately meaningless."*

*"On the other hand, psychology and its related disciplines suggested an inner reality more ephemeral, less tied to the visible and concrete, and which was thus seen as somehow more truthful."*

What interest me here is how these two statements don't necessarily contradict one another, but point out the daily mixture of illusion and reality in our current age, both outside of the stage as well as very deliberately composed onstage (or at the artist's studio). It seems as if Aronson is trying to say that in fact illusion is used to express this 'inner reality more ephemeral, less tied to the visible and concrete.' How does Kentridge use illusionistic techniques accordingly, and how does he cope with his inner reality?

Kentridge's animations refrain from high-tech digital technique. This is "as much an argument about the failed utopia of new technologies as about the pleasure and playful engagement of time-based art." Thus, Kentridge also questions the creation and perceiving of images. He plays with a constant dialogue between

illusion and fourth-wall-breaking in experiments that combine stop motion animation and live action. Aside from his autonomous work, he conducted several opera's, designing the stage décor, combining it with animations and shadow figurines (*I am not me, the Horse is not mine* after Nikolai Gogol's *The Nose*, 2008). The sequences are a build-up of multiple media-layers; Kentridge being filmed drawing in his own animation with charcoal and performing in real-time in front of the projection, where not only he himself, but also his shadow becomes an, in one sense independent, element. Secondly, the phases where the charcoal drawings are being erased, normally left out of the animation, are deliberately included, shifting the focus from the narrative to the 'realness' of the animating-process taking place. A triple illusion; that of the narrative in the animation, the filmrecording of Kentridge drawing, and the deformed shadowplay both in the projection as well as one caused by it, which all become visible in the live presence of the artist.

Would this be accurately described as "an attempt to capture multiple times and locations within a single framework or to re-present the visible image within itself as an act of dislocation through reframing"? Where Aronson is hesitant when it comes to combining the two languages, I find that William Kentridge's work derives its fascinating effect from the very intelligent use of putting layers of media one over another, while at the same time making the illusions plainly visible. Being the artist, he is very present in his own work. As Mark Rosenthal puts it, in his *William Kentridge, a portrait of the artist*: "Between the shadows, images, and drawings, there are effectively four versions of him in the room. After putting the fragments together and admiring his work, he walks away to the left; in his absence, the figure in the photo comes to life and walks off to the right. Through these magical acts of creativity, Kentridge discovered a new way to describe and realise himself through art."

My current filmworks are very bare; a single, repetitive action takes place in a stripped environment. Minimalist versions. One would link Bruce Nauman's *Mapping the Studio* rather than Kentridge's *Journey to the Moon* (important to note that Kentridge acknowledges being inspired by Nauman). However, I miss the play with material in his light-hearted manner that makes me admire Kentridge. There is a kind of magical illusion in layering different media on top of each other; but I don't see the disruption (at least, no unintentional one), as Aronson warns. He finds content being overwhelmed by form, but I think that *form can become content*. If there's anything many a philosopher has taught me, it is that my perception of the world is only a construction, and that I am a child of my time and culture. In fact, I try to use purposive illusion to feel closer to a certain 'purer perception' of existence. Here, I would appear to agree with Aronson's slightly suspicious mention of "*an inner reality more ephemeral, less tied to the visible and concrete, and which was thus seen as somehow more truthful.*" Kentridge is very well able to accomplish this through his combination of audiovisual techniques and real-time performance, and I'm going to take his example.

### 3

Peter Sonderen: *Performing arts and fine art: busy with bodies. What body?*

Marina Abramovic

Guido van der Werve

In his essay theoretician of the arts Peter Sonderen looks at the role of the body in art performance, as compared to the traditional performative arts, such as theatre. Performativity is 'explicitly connected to *action*, to working in reality'. But how then, Sonderen questions, is performativity connected to the body? And what does performance imply for the relationship between the audience, the work of art and the artist/body?

The interest in performativity arose with new movements such as Fluxus, Dada, action painting, and groups such as the Wiener Aktionisten etc. This had something to do with seeing the world as a performative act. Identity for example is more and more constructed through "repeated stylized acts" rather than biological background, Sonderen states (after Judith Butler). The body is essential and therefore "the act is central not the reference to something else."

Aim was to terminate the barrier between life and art, the real and the staged. An absence of illusion, that would imply for the audience to enter the realness and become part of the work of art.

"This is precisely what the work of art tried to accomplish: getting art and the real into a common *space* and also a shared *time* (...)".

Spectators become participants during certain performative works. (...) "the intention of the artist or a pre-established content or value of the piece is no longer valid. (...) The outcome is uncertain, or better, open to the situation." Distinctions between subject and object, representation and presentation become unclear. The act of doing creates a common space where art and reality come in different proportions.

One of the obvious examples Sonderen mentions, is Marina Abramovic's piece *Lips of Thomas*, a work where she challenges her body to the extreme, until the audience is forced to intervene (becoming active participants).

Abramovic is a name not seldom mentioned by teachers in relation to my work. I feel a hesitation, not to say a reluctance to this comparison. Since physical endurance towards mental meditation is also part of my work, I understand the link. However, recently I discovered the artist Guido van der Werve. He is an artist that I feel much more akin to, artistically speaking. In his book *Nummer vijftien: at war with oneself* three of his works are considered, all of which have a very physically challenging character. Basically, he discovers a love for marathons and triathlons, and the works evolve around this and classical music that he is fond of.

I should note that while the performances of Abramovic take place in a particular spatial temporality (only a limited documentation remains), Van der Werve uses film, meaning the two works use a different medium. One can discuss the importance of this in terms of the approach of the audience towards either live performance or film.

However, the films by Van der Werve register real-time performances that are documented rather than completely staged. The act is true, Van der Werve purposely makes no use of actors. It fits very well in Sonderen's writing; the body is essential and the act is central. However, I disagree about the part where the reference is of less importance. In the case of Van der Werve's work *nummer veertien* there is a strong bodily performance (a triathlon of about 1700 km), as well as a kind of slap-stick-like turn of events involving an orchestra, a choir, a firesuit, exploding windows and a crane. I believe this to be very poetic. It is said that in poetry meaning exists in between words. Could also be said that the reference exists on the threshold of the act?

Where I read the work of Abramovic as very serious, loaded with symbolism, I find a different sensation of estrangement and, also, narrative in the work of Van der Werve. Here, I think, the act actually is much more central because he uses his body less as 'a tool' or an object.

## 4

Michael Dudok de Wit: *The Red Turtle*

Joost Zwagerman: *De stilte van het licht*

*The Red Turtle* tells the story of a man, stranded on a deserted tropical island, neither small nor big, covered in bamboo and the occasional crab, who finds his trials to escape on a raft prevented by a giant Red Turtle. Cross with the Turtle after the third raft drifts apart, he turns it helplessly upside down to die in the burning sun. However, the man is suddenly crushed by remorse and tries to save the animal in its final moment. When he wakes after a night of pledging water on the Turtle, he discovers it has laid off its shell and has become a woman. After some hesitation they come together and have a child, a boy that grows up knowing nothing beyond the island and the sea that surrounds it, until the time comes that he leaves it for good.

Not a word is spoken in the entire film, nevertheless, the emotion speaking out of it does not need verbalization. It was the only time I ever cried while watching a movie.

The Island might even be the main character of the animation; it provokes many important events in the lives of the three people, and is ever present. It shelters and provides, but when a tsunami hits it, it becomes very dangerous, and the little family barely survives.

It is the story of the very direct relation of mankind in nature. The three people sleep on the beach or in the grass; no hut though. They wear sealskin clothes. They sit on the rocky top of the Island to watch the sun sink in the sea. Other than a small glass bottle that drifts to the island (this reminds one of *The Gods Must Be Crazy*), there are few constructional elements. Is the island being used, or is there a dialogue going on in which island and inhabitant are equal speakers?

It sometimes seems as though there are two opposites when it comes to the relationship of mankind and nature; nature is either being used and manipulated according to the whims and needs of mankind, or tributed, placed in an almost spiritual light. I think of an interview with Dutch photographer Charlotte Dumas, who portrays animals, mostly horses. She seeks the "true" relationship between man and beast, what they really mean to each other since ancient times, how they occupy a same world but aren't seen as equal living organisms; animals are either used or petted.

Does this also go up for the natural landscape? How can a landscape be properly seen, not through Romantic glasses nor the mechanic notion of a landscape architect? And then described.

When I watched *The Red Turtle*, I saw a movie that portrays a single, unexuberant narrative, and yet I felt completely enchanted. My imagination was triggered; I attached some of my own life-events to the scenes, that depict a life so far from my own.

The animation received one great review after another; many name it unique, one-of-a-kind, poetic. "Het zijn animatiefilms als gedichten, niet te vangen voor eenduidige interpretatie" says Berend Jan Bockting. (...) "De vervagende grenzen tussen dood en leven, mens en dier, waar en onwaar moedigen je aan je ratio te laten varen en te kijken als een kind."

Then again: to which extend would leaving a rational perspective out of the question be the same as *not questioning* a work? How to say something about a poetic work, and leave its poetics intact?

Too often have I had trouble with dealing with the words, the language around my work. I realise that, even though my works may have a strong poetic character, "*poetry*" is not a word to use as a shield. With that I mean that assigning a work to the realm of poetry and leaving it there, is not enough.

Michael Dudok de Wit has accomplished something very difficult here; he made a poetic work that can be

fathomed by anyone as easy as children do when they fall for fairy-tales. When I walked out of the cinema, it felt as waking up from a dream.

A dream is preferably left intact, not to be scrutinised, as if that would take away its enchanting aura. However, if there is one man able to find *just* words to describe art and its poetics, it would be poet and essayist Joost Zwagerman, in my opinion. Unfortunately, he can't review *The Red Turtle* anymore.

In a collection of essays called *De Stilte van het Licht* he considers many different pieces of art in a very personal and associative manner. Indeed, he links poems to certain artworks. The essays are collected under the chapters *stilte, schoonheid, onbehagen, verdwijning* (silence, beauty, uneasiness, disappearance). But if a fifth chapter would have been added, I'd have called it *comfort*.

Not long after the publication of *De stilte van het licht*, Zwagerman killed himself. I read the book with this knowledge in the back of my head, and could not help but sense a certain search for *comfort* in and through the different artworks he wrote about. Mostly works he enjoyed, that he felt a connection with (often masterpieces). Above all he makes it very sensible how they had affected him in the first encounter. What Zwagerman essentially does, is to involve imagination in his texts to address the emotion invoked by art. He imagines what the artist might have thought while working, how the characters portrayed would have felt, how objects would have been approached, cherished. Emotion is a tricky thing; it is subjective, yet can reach a universal level. Zwagerman is aware of this. Reading the book, I believe his strategy is to try to express his thoughts and associations as clearly as he can, rather than shying away and trying to be objective.

For a long time I had (and continue to have) great difficulty in appointing the specific emotion that my own work speaks of. There is the aspect of exhaustion, self-denial even, which I would call *onbehagen* (uneasiness). Yet, despite this discontent, the work speaks of strength rather than feebleness. The action performed serves as a *comfort*: troost in onbehagen.

Returning to Zwagerman and his use of language, which I feel is able to capture the sensitivity of art. It is my intention to not only take some examples of these, but also try to identify how Zwagerman is able to describe spaces the way he does; is this the poetic language mentioned by Bachelard? As mentioned before, he surely uses his imagination in describing the work, what it would've been like to be the person portrayed, the sensations a work provokes in the visitor. In the chapter *Verdwijnen*, one essay is devoted to empty rooms (*Totaal witte kamers*). A few remarks from this essay.

On *The Destroyed Room* by Jeff Wall: "De kamer puilt uit van de rotzooi, maar is toch adembenemend leeg: mét het vernielen en vernietigen van al dit huisraad is ook de ziel uit deze verlaten kamer weggeslagen."  
On *Sunbeams or Sunshine* by Vilhelm Hammershøi: "De kamer is niet zozeer verlaten – dat woord klinkt te neutraal – maar in de steek gelaten."

He cites the opening of a poem by Gerrit Kouwenaar, which I will mention for the sake of clarity:

*Laten we nog eenmaal de kamer wit maken  
nog eenmaal de totaal witte kamer, jij, ik  
dit zal geen tijd sparen maar nog eenmaal  
de kamer wit maken, nu, nooit meer later*

In the end, Zwagerman concludes, the empty rooms echo a happiness that is in the past, hinting of lives that have been lived in it and can only be guessed at.

In the final scene of *The Red Turtle*, the island is left deserted (except for the occasional crab) again. The three people have all left it, one way or another. The animation begins and ends with the entering and leaving of humankind. Not to break down this masterpiece, but why would there be nothing left to tell about the island after the humans have disappeared? Personally, I would have loved it if there'd been a scene capturing the island without humans. This would be interesting enough; the bamboo forest, the rain,

the waves crashing against the shore; they are very well studied and beautifully animated.

Where Berend Jan Bockting compares *The Red Turtle* to Memoru Oshii's *Angels Egg*, I am reminded of Disney's *Fantasia* (1940), one of Walt Disney's more artistic projects. Igor Strawinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* is visualised with the story of the beginning of life. It starts with all elements, fire, wind, water, volcano's, lava, overflowing seas, heavy storms. To me as a child, it was fascinating, and a little frightening. A lengthy scene without any forms of life (yet). And a great example of how a narrative can do without subjects – by being a mere *space*, just as the paintings of the empty rooms by Vilhelm Hammershoi and Edward Hopper. In this sense, Disney and Zwagerman both accomplished what Micheal Dudok de Wit did not attempt; to see the drama in the room, in the landscape, the island, that is stripped of humanity.

## 5

### Gaston Bachelard: *Poetics of Space*

#### Sarah Bennett, Mirja Hiltunen and Mark Dawes: readings from *Art, Community and Environment: Educational Perspectives*

Building a waiting room last year was an attempt to trigger the wonder of the 'poetic space'. This is a term introduced and investigated by Gaston Bachelard in his book *the poetics of space*. The chapters are called "Nests", "Shells", "Corners". There is a very intimate, almost magical connotation attached to certain retreats like these, as are often mentioned in folk tales: castles, attics, cellars, gardens, huts in the forest.

Bachelard argues the advantages of speaking in *poetics* rather than approaching the resonance of space through psychoanalysis: "by going immediately *beyond* all psychology or psychoanalysis, we feel a poetic power rising naïvely within us." And, few pages further: "The poetic image is an emergence from language, it is always a little above the language of signification. (...) The poet speaks on the threshold of being." I like how he puts more trust in and weight on a kind of daydreaming and imagination when dealing with this phenomenology. I think it also draws more closely on the sentiment of my artistic work, which is conceived in a very intuitive manner, and I am wary of attaching too much psychological meaning to them. It is also Bachelard's intention to stay away from enclosing images in definite ideas.

Another thing Bachelard mentions in his introduction is a *function of unreality*. "By the swiftness of its actions, the imagination separates us from the past as from reality (...)" This also happens in "the poem, which interweaves real and unreal, and gives dynamisms to language by means of the dual activity of signification and poetry." A co-operation of the functions real and unreal.

Bachelard seeks to concentrate solely on intimate spaces, spaces that attract, starting with the house, man's ultimate refuge. He quotes several phrases of poets in order to demonstrate how we are affected by the space we live in. We tend to carry the places we live in with us, and they resonate throughout our new encounters with space. No matter where we end up living, the house of our youth for example has a major impact in the way we experience any new home.

Bachelard points to imagination as the great force involved. Daydreaming starts when the human being has found the slightest shelter, illusions that provide comfort and protection. "He experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams. (...) In this remote region, memory and imagination remain associated, each one working for their mutual deepening." The result: the place we live in becomes a narrative of a very subjective nature.

Bachelard takes care not to break up this community of imagination and memory. The chief benefit of the house, he states, is that it allows one to dream in peace. It shelters and protects, thus has the power to store the human's dreams, thoughts and memories. Outside of the house, we are cast out, in "a circumstance in which the hostility of men and of the universe accumulates."

Another important aspect of a place that we identify ourselves with, is solitude. Daydreaming is usually done in solitude. These are treasured, for the human "instinctively knows that this space identified with his solitude is creative; (...) when the attic room is lost and gone, there remains the fact that we once loved a garret, once lived in an attic." The space does not long to become extended, but above all to be possessed. Our unconscious is housed, and knows how to create a home anywhere. "Space calls for action, and before action, the imagination is at work." For intimacy attracts, and well-being.

To cut short, Bachelard states that in each one of us there is "an oneiric house, a house of dream-memory, that is lost in shadow of a beyond of the real past."

Sensitive and thoughtful as Bachelard's statement may be, he makes a few bold expressions. For one, there is the 'hostility' of the world outside one's personal shelter, where one has to brace oneself. (This may be true to some extent; for me, putting on a coat and scarf is part of a ritual to prepare myself for going

outside. I often am reminded of a nursery tale by Nick Sharatt: “the green queen lay in a red bed and looked at the grey day. But she had to go out, so she got up and put on her blue shoes, her black jacket, and her yellow and purple and brown and red and turquoise scarf”).

Secondly, Bachelard is very much focused on the individual, subjective experience; the duality of one individual against the whole of the world. We do live in a highly individually-oriented society, compared to some other cultures; however, it makes me curious to the spirit of the *communal space*.

How is a communal narrative established?

In the book *Art, Community and Environment: Educational Perspectives* papers from diverse authors (a.o. artists) are collected. Though most readings focus on social projects by artists that provide room for “hidden interests and unheard voices”<sup>4</sup>, and regeneration of the neighbourhood, there is much attention for the experience of bringing people together and creating a communal space with a “community spirit”<sup>5</sup>, too.

Where Bachelard makes a sharp distinction between the atmosphere of the private and the public sphere, Sarah Bennett, lecturer at the MA Fine Art at the University of Plymouth, names several interesting persons who contradict, or rather nuance this, in her paper *Crossing the Line*.

Edward Soja for example, American cultural theorist and urban planner. He initiated the idea of the *thirdspace*, that can be described as an 'inbetween' space, transitional, fluid and overlapping. A concept that opens up ways of thinking about spatial design and practices. I will explain this further.

Increasingly, public and private space are interweaving; “What takes place in public settings can be of a private nature; we tolerate the most public of spaces in our private homes in the form of television and (...) the Internet (...).”<sup>6</sup> Perhaps, what is meant by 'home', Bennett states, includes such transitional spaces; take for example the windowsill, the balcony.

Bennett quotes Doreen Massey: “think of places as essentially open, porous, and the products of links with other places (...).”<sup>7</sup> This reminds me of the *Poetics of Relation* from Glissant: 'places' can easily be replaced with 'people'.

Returning to the communal narrative; there are, of course, many artists involved in community art; take for example the *Bijlmer Spinoza Festival* (2009) by Thomas Hirschhorn. A project during which the artist himself was present, the whole day everyday, for three months, during which lectures were given and events organised. A production in the Bijlmer area in Amsterdam, art concerned with empowering communities and individuals. Many reviews and interviews with local participants endorse the positive experience of community building the project has had. But it is one thing to examine the barriers between public and private space, and another to accomplish a lasting change in cultural divisions.

Key word in this is *agency*.

Mirja Hiltunen (Art Education Lecturer at the University of Lapland), uses the term to define “the process whereby one individual or group of people acts as a conduit, facilitator or enabler on behalf of others or themselves.”<sup>8</sup> In her paper *Community-Based Art Education in the North: A Space for Agency?* She examines how art professionals can facilitate “the empowerment of a community through the agency of the community itself (...)” and through art. A necessity turns out to be creating *a space for agency*. Studying two different projects, Hiltunen comes to the conclusion that peer-learning, a shared experience, and most importantly, the ability to cooperate with different kinds of people are mentioned by participants as most central. On the one hand, knowledge of social structure and organizational skill are required, as would seem logical; on the other hand, there has to be much attention for creating “a culture of dialogue within which differences are embraced (...). (...) situations which people enter in order to collaborate with the artist in creating meaning, and a medium and space where they can share them and give them form and voice. The starting point for all learning is the learner's phenomenal, physical and sensory relationship with the environment.”<sup>9</sup> Listening, growing trust, expressing different points of view and doing things together.

---

<sup>4</sup>Dawes, Mark. *Beyond Process: Art, Empowerment and Sustainability*. p. 73

<sup>5</sup>., p. 73

<sup>6</sup>Bennett, Sarah. *Crossing the line* p.114

<sup>7</sup>Bennett, Sarah. *Crossing the line* p.117

<sup>8</sup>Hiltunen, Mirja. *Community-Based Art Education in the North: A Space for Agency?* p. 91

<sup>9</sup>Hiltunen, Mirja. ., p. 95



“Once a community is empowered to the extent of regaining its cultural identity, what can be done with that empowerment to cement its inhabitants' role as co-designers of their space (...)?” is the central question in the paper *Beyond Process: Art, Empowerment and Sustainability* by Mark Dawes, Glasgow-based artist, writer and educator. To that extent, he proposes a more holistic, long-term approach, where a great deal is reserved for education. To create communal support and care on a deeper level, there has to be much attention for skill-training (managing, communicating, technical and creative skills, confidence building etc.) and encouragement to continue the project after the professionals leave the place. “Under this scenario, the community becomes the kind of informal 'free university' espoused by Joseph Beuys. (...) - the aim is not just to perform in the short term, but to learn how to perform, to begin performing and to create opportunities for others to learn to perform.”<sup>10</sup>

Sarah Bennett similarly says: “(...)intention is to foster understanding and identify common ground between all the different groups involved in order to encourage inclusive and sustainable social change through art (...)”<sup>11</sup>

In the end, we are the creators of the 'public dimension', that is first and foremost a space for dialogue, a space that is always in flux. This can either be a challenge as Bachelard indicated, or, as Hiltunen simply puts it: “walking a fine line between possibilities and restrictions.”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Dawes, Mark ., p. 74

<sup>11</sup>Bennett, Sarah

<sup>12</sup>Hiltunen, Mirja. p. 93