

The following text is an interview with Lily van der Stokker conducted by curator Christiane Berndes on 17 August 2006.

CB: In 2005, the Van Abbemuseum acquired several video artworks by Valie Export, Joan Jonas, Martha Rosler, and Carolee Schneemann. They are all artists who, in the late sixties and early seventies, used video and film to create works from a typically female perspective or in which women's social status is a central theme. While I was trying to figure out how to present them, I remembered our conversations on feminism. I also remembered that you were interested in art and decoration. You once told me about an exhibition in Cologne for which you made a wall drawing that was used as background for other artists' works.

LvdS: That was the 'Punishment & Decoration' exhibition at the Höhenthal und Bergen Gallery in Cologne in 1994. The exhibition was curated by Michael Corris and Robert Nickas. I had had long conversations with them about the decorative element, which I very deliberately use in my wall drawings. In their exhibitions they played with the concepts of 'figure' and 'ground'(1). They used my wall drawings as the backdrop for works by Mike Scott, Imi Knoebel and Peter Halley. This whole idea was later taken up by people such as Erik Troncy, who used it in his exhibition 'Dramatically Different' in Le Magasin in 1997. There they used a work of mine that consists of a plaid pattern as the background for a work by Allan McCollum.

CB: Despite the fact that your wall drawings were very prominent in the room, they were at the same time very open and welcoming towards the other works.

That was why we asked you to make a design for wallpaper that we could use for the gallery where we are going to exhibit the work of Export, Jonas, Rosler and Schneemann. You immediately replied enthusiastically, the outcome being plaid wallpaper that we have now acquired for the collection. To me, the wallpaper puts into question the white modernistic exhibition halls. It questions the relationship between the works of art themselves and the context in which they are exhibited. How did you perceive this commission? What was your biggest challenge?

LvdS: In my work I play with hierarchies like the relationship between art and the decorative element. Decoration is often considered inferior. But in this sense it is also supportive. Decoration needs to frame something, encircle it, but it also wants to help and show affection for it. This is an interesting function that I use a lot in my work. For me, decoration is an expression of the need to offer warmth and security. The use of my wall drawings as a background made them look like wallpaper and ended up highlighting the decorative element even more.

All this sounds like a strategy I came up with, but it wasn't to begin with. It was really just listening to my own intuition. I just couldn't help it. My education as a visual artist gave me a love for monochrome paintings. Almost all my friends in New York are, by the way, also monochrome painters! The fact that I like to work with decoration has to do with a deeply felt yearning, something that keeps coming back and that I would like to explore further. Furthermore, decorativeness has negative connotations in the art world. I want to change those negative connotations into positive ones. I want to get to work on it and immerse myself in it. I actually like the so-called meaninglessness of it. In it I see a huge reservoir of energy. In working with the female element, I don't want to be against something, but for something.

The decorative element also has to do with 'nesting' and with the female gender. In the early nineties I read the book 'This Sex Which Is Not One', by philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray. She writes very poetically

about the feminine. Not that I understood everything exactly, but her texts inspired me. Decoration is not only about wealth and abundance but also about fertility, nature and the reproductive organs. I want to take my kitschy longing for frivolous coverings to the extreme, I want to admit excess. That is why the Van Abbemuseum's request to design wallpaper is so good for me. I've been wanting to do this for a long time.

CB: Your wallpaper engages in a special relationship with the works of other artists in that gallery. We also asked you to develop an exhibition programme for this room. How are you going to go about it? Are there guidelines or rules you will follow?

LvdS: Art is exhibited according to certain rules. But why can't you hang artworks one on top of the other or immediately next to each other like Ineke Werther did in the 1987 exhibition 'The Selection' in the former Kruithuis Museum in Den Bosch? Why must a painting always be a flat square object that hangs on a wall with lots of space around it? I have my doubts about the self-evidence of this and have tried to break through it in my work. Then we also have, for example, the work of American artist Jim Iserman. He both paints and makes furniture and he upholsters the furniture with beautiful soft fabrics in the same geometric pattern as the painting, so when you sit in front of the painting you are looking at a geometrical painting, while your behind is sitting on the same geometrical pattern. What I also find very interesting is to work with the concept of the ornament. Imagine a nude painting. It has become a cliché and something people hang above their couch. I could hang nude paintings over my wallpaper. You would have to ask yourself which of the two is more 'decorative'.

CB: The first guest that you invited was Andrea Zittel. Would you care to elaborate?

LvdS: Originally, the idea was to invite a female artist whose work is related to that of Lee Lozano, which can be found in the Oudbouw. For me, that person was Andrea Zittel. I first saw her work in the early nineties at the Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York. She had an

exhibition of clothing, but also floor coverings. One of the carpets consisted of rectangular shapes, partially on the floor and partially on the wall, with specially marked areas telling you where to sit and where to lie down. The shapes had an obvious relationship with the body and its movement through space. I met her in 1994, while we were installing our works in a group exhibition. She arrived with two small black suitcases, one for the daytime and one for at night. She wore black clothes; a skirt lined with fur that doubled as a coat or blanket. It was a kind of survival get-up. I found it fascinating; the needy body as an element determining the form. I would actually have liked to show a film of a floating island she designed and on which she lived for a month – another one of her survival projects – but she preferred to show the videos 'Sufficient Self' (2004) and 'Small Liberties' (2006). They are about her projects in the Californian Joshua Tree desert, where she lives and works as a pioneer in a settlement of her own design.

*Note 1: 'Punishment and decoration: art in an age of militant superficiality', Artforum, April 1993, pp. 78-83*

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