

Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys

FUNDAÇÃO CAIXA GERAL DE DEPÓSITOS

Culturigest

Questions by Katia Anguelova and Andrea Wiarda; answers by Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys, exchanged via e-mail, May 2009.

Katia Anguelova/ Andrea Wiarda: Could you briefly describe yourself/(selves)?

Jos de Gruyter: Very slow, very jealous, a coward and often a liar. Very scared of Islamists and diseases, and many other things. Luckily I have a good heart, both mentally and physically.

Harald Thys: I don't know anymore.

You have been working together for over fifteen years. What was the reason for your beginning to work together and how would you describe your collaborative practice?

H: Actually, we are now 'celebrating' the 20th anniversary of our collaboration. I think the main reason is a kind of shared view that we have about humans. Back in the 1980s, at art school, there were the teachers and the other students, who served as examples to us. The word that best describes our initial relationship with these characters was a feeling of consternation. This was mostly followed by a feeling of depression very soon afterwards. As a kind of survival instinct, we started imitating them, and quite quickly these characters became part of our universe and even possible actors for our videos.

Our collaborative practice mostly takes place in the car on our way to some gloomy location. The car is a safe haven. It contains no more than two seats, directed towards the outside world populated by strange species, sometimes dangerous, sometimes victimised, and their creations: houses, cars, villages, one-liners, etc. These trips result in one or more heavy residues (depressions), which are then further developed and result in the creation of new characters and settings.

In your latest photo series (Untitled, nos. 1-9) you have dressed wooden constructions to make them resemble human figures in various caricatural postures or situations; the characters in many of your films seem to be acting out preconceived roles – albeit minimally and in a detached fashion. Can you elaborate on how you view man in society (and society itself) in relation to your work?

J: Since the start of the unification of Europe, there has been a growing tendency towards regionalism, nationalism and extreme chauvinism, because people are scared. In an effort to fight this fear, they turn to the past, to their ancestors, their perceived history and traditions, in order to understand how to survive. They start to re-enact the past, hoping that they will be spared the worst, knowing, however, that the worst is yet to come. The whole Vintage movement is proof of this tendency. The Mini and the Beetle have been reintroduced, and in France they are working on a new Citroen DS. In a way, society has come to a standstill, arriving at an enormous depression, in which we all take part. I personally think society has become far too complex for human beings. That's why they are working on super computers, in order to take it all over. In a way, the creatures in the photo series seem to know it all. They know the meaning of life, especially the figure sitting under the umbrella, with the big glasses.

It has been stated that you think of 'man' as a mannequin... and the 'characters' and figures in your works often seem rather like dolls, dummies or marionettes. How do you view these 'puppets'? What is their meaning to you in terms of culture in general?

H: I think it has to do with the phenomenon of immobilisation. You can see this occur in animals who are confronted with some bizarre opponent, another (bigger) animal, a human being, or a combination of the two. Humans also have this capacity. The same mechanism can be applied to the relationship between objects and humans or animals. Sometimes objects can provoke

the same immobilisation, but objects can also undergo the same consternation. They can suffer an eternal shock when they are confronted with some weird character and become silent witnesses to perverted or strange actions, or to the behaviour of humans or animals.

In this sense, the characters in our videos, whether they are puppets or human beings, have all undergone this shock. They are there and are unwilling or incapable of evolving. This makes them dangerous and/or fragile and renders their looks and the way they look interesting. As a result, they become fascinating to look at for the other characters in the video, and finally for the audience looking at it.

This immobilisation is also the final stage in the evolution – decline – of western civilisation. The physical expansion has given way to digital expansion and leads to a slow and gigantic implosion, a massive standstill, an epidemic of autism.

What kind of world do your characters live in?

J: In well-structured, well-organised worlds, in which depressions are so powerful that they become enjoyable. Quite similar to the world in which we live now. For example, in cities like Leuven (B), Zoetermeer (NL), Gent (B), Antwerp (B), Hove (B), and many, many more cities from which we get our inspiration.

“The ‘uncanny’ is undoubtedly related to what is frightening – to what arouses dread and horror; equally certainly, too, the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general,” states Freud. Could we think of this feeling of ‘fear’ and ‘anxiety’ that generates confusion and estrangement as being a fundamental notion for you?

H: We can presume that fear forms the basis for the actions or the absence of actions of the characters in the videos, though it might be more complex. What is certain, though, is that they are in a trance. Their behaviour is monotone. They are neither good nor

bad. They are driven by unknown forces, and therefore they are unpredictable at the same time.

We once watched a documentary on prisons in South Africa. One of the prisoners who lost his teeth told the reporter in Afrikaans: - "In die dag ik kan lach met jou en's avonds ik kan je vermoer" (during the day, I can laugh with you, and in the evening I can kill you).

The dramaturgy you use in your films, and often also in your photographic work, is very specific; the location is often enclosed and very self-contained. What determines the setup of your work?

J: We have this fantasy about a couple of 60-year-olds living in a very large, clean brick house somewhere in Flanders. When the woman looks outside from behind the curtains, the man who is watching her says: "...come on, dear, don't look outside. It's ugly there. Inside it's better".

What role does sound play in your work?

H: In our first videos, people talked, but gradually they have been talking less and less. When they do talk, they speak through the mouth of others (Jos and me or my father). This reveals their remote-controlled characteristics and destroys their sexual identity, which is replaced by a kind of bestiality when they produce strange sounds (dubbed by Jos and me), like animals trapped in a corner, or monsters eager to terrorise the others. These sounds are surrounded by a deep silence. For us, the alienating aspects of reality, its weight, are given even more stress by eliminating all the sounds that it could produce.

On the other hand, Belgian architecture, which is based on the laws of gravity (putting one brick on top of the other), produces very little sound and instead suffocates all the sound produced by humans. The lack of sound also emphasises the two-dimensional aspects of the image (the background). The sound that is sometimes added in the videos is just a flat layer put on top of a flat image.

We always have in mind this image of my sister - who plays in a lot of our videos - crossing a very busy intersection in Merksem on the outskirts of Antwerp, one of the most depressing places in Europe. The scene of her crossing the street would take like half an hour (because she would walk very slowly), and over this image Jos and me would dub the cars passing by.

You sometimes show photographs alongside your video works, or sculptural objects. How do the objects and photographs you make relate to your film work?

H: The objects or photos are often frozen residues of earlier videos; sometimes they serve as prototypes for videos that are yet to be made. For example, the latest series, which was shown in Kaleidoscope, inspired us to make a video with the characters posing in the photographs. The way these works (photos, drawings, sculptures) are developed is the same as for the videos. We not only fantasise about the figures, humans, animals, houses and streets that are modelled, photographed or drawn, but also about the people who made them: during the creative process we parody ourselves as clumsy craftsmen or Dutch alternative artists dressed in overalls and working with dripping noses in freezing cold studios surrounded by beer cans...

What is also interesting for us is to try to understand the space where we exhibit something, and to install or transform the space in such a way that it gives off an uncanny atmosphere, so that the people seeing the show don't feel very much at ease. For example, for our show with François Curlet at Le Plateau in Paris, we painted the whole space in grey, including all the windows and objects that were on display. The ensemble of the video, photos and grey objects in these grey-painted spaces produced for us the feeling of an exhibition space in a spaceship in the year 3000 where the remains of western civilisation are put on display for the inhabitants of the ship.

During the Berlin Biennial, where we showed the video

The Frigate, we transformed a cellar into a kind of German technical basement by adding false doors and walls and confronting the audience with the factual presence of this space by turning on a very bright light between each projection of the video.

What is to be the focus of your next project?

J: The next project will be a film in which the creatures of the photo series mentioned above will be brought to life. They will be the inhabitants of a strange, cruel, funny, and totally dull place, which is so extremely boring that everything that happens feels like an escape.

This interview was made on the occasion of the exhibition *Suitcase Illuminated #6, Tunnel Effect*, curated by Katia Anguelova, Alessandra Poggianti and Andrea Wiarda, which took place in Kaleidoscope HQ, Milan, from 26 May to 30 June 2009.



Der Schlamm von Branst, 2008
Video, colour, sound, 20'00"
Courtesy of the artists; Galerie Dependance,
Brussels; Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

Pandemonium

Michael Van den Abeele

In researching Artificial Intelligence and connectionist models, the American scientist O.G. Selfridge designed a pattern-recognition machine. His model was an attempt to simulate the manner in which the human brain recognised patterns.

He gave his invention the name *Pandemonium*, in reference to the gathering place of all demons (also known as the capital of Hell). The programme was explained by Selfridge as consisting of a 'head demon' who listens to the 'shrieks' of 'lower demons'. These lower demons are specialised in shrieking, to express with what certainty they have recognised a pattern, for which they are specifically designed.

It is not known exactly why Selfridge gave this name (and the ideas associated therewith) to his brainchild. The reducing of demons to spineless, programmed entities is remarkable given how demons are mostly regarded as stubborn. In this Pandemonium there is, however, the question of a well-ordered structure. The specific nomenclature and connotation of Selfridge's programme run radically counter to the romanticised notion of diabolical rage and are closer in nature to the bureaucratic systematics of Auschwitz. Lower demons sit next to one another in expectation, addressing themselves to a more highly positioned upper demon. Once in awhile they exude a soporific, abrupt shriek, without intention or expression; nothing more than an utterance of the fact they have recognised that for which they are programmed.

This situation, and the way in which Selfridge writes about it, closely resembles the staging and characters in the films and photos of Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys. Whether it concerns a merciless master, his diverse accomplices, or the final victim,

they are all programmed to react to a certain stimulus. The actors are positioned like models in something more evocative of an organigram than a staging. There is no empathy or alliance with their role or with the actions they perform. All of the figures find themselves in a state that can be described as constitutively autistic, whereby they have lost every interpretive possibility. As such, it is more accurate to speak of a bureaucratic implementation than of a dramatic performance. Although the characters interact with one another, they are, in essence, separate from one another. There is no empathy in the interaction.

And within this rigidly ordered system the characters don an archaic decorum that lends them a sort of authenticity or humanness. Just as the sterile and artificially intelligent simulation of Selfridge's programme is clothed in archaic concepts (demons, pandemonium), the attributes upon which de Gruyter and Thys's characters derive their status are stuck-on; fake beards, uniforms, masks, etc.

The specific space in which these figures are placed makes of them demons in a box. A de Gruyter and Thys interior reminds one of television sitcoms that are always filmed in the same setting and of which one explicitly feels a reticence. There reigns an oppressive 'indoors sensation' originating from the fact that one knows one can never leave this interior. The characters can step through the door but there is no outside. When one leaves the interior, one emerges in the structure of the *organigram* itself.

On the rare occasions that there is an outdoor scene in a de Gruyter and Thys film, it is noticeable how much this contrasts with the indoor scenes; they mostly present a natural landscape, without a living soul, and they exude an atmospheric light. The interior shots, however, always show the same harsh and austere lit setting. Inside and outside are simply two dimensions that are no longer connected to one another, two categories that are exclusive. The characters implicated in these interior spaces are, in other words, interned.

In the film *Der Schlamm von Branst* (2008), which is included in this exhibition, the relationship between the inside and the unattainable outside world is most explicitly addressed. The *Pandemonium* here is a creative clay workshop, and the 'shrieks' of the lower demons are translated into the gazes the characters cast at each other and at their clay sculptures. *Der Schlamm von Branst* most strongly reveals the development of de Gruyter and Thys' oeuvre toward an art of the portrait. Actions are minimised in this film and the emphasis lays on the portrayal of the characters as well as the sculptures, in particular on their gaze.

From foolish awe, through a lost puppy look, to a frenetic, ecstatic stare; the gazes are thrown at one another, but ultimately appear to be directed at the clay sculptures. These sculptures are also portrayed, but their gazes do not communicate with those of their audience. The sculptures stand with internalised, reserved, or haughty postures, like idols disconnected from their creators. The participants in this workshop are prisoners overmastered by their own sculptures.

During the first half of the film one of the characters cries almost continuously, holding an un-worked block of clay clutched in her arms. By means of explicit post-synchronisation, the crying is attached to this character as an attribute. The voice, as the core of a person, is removed from the body and replaced by a mechanical prop. Since *De Vloek* (The Curse) in 1999, this method of post-synchronisation has been consistently applied in each film, and in their occasional performances – which once again flattens the characters and enhances the closed-in nature of the space.

An outdoor shot occurring halfway through the film shows a muddy riverbank. It is the mud of Branst (to which the title refers) that is processed into clay. The image is overexposed but still atmospheric, and is accompanied by 'doom' synthesizer music. The scene looks like an ethereal vision or an image from a dream. The shapeless mud as Source from which the sculptures are built

receives a phantasmal aura; a sort of authenticity that the interned sculptors vainly seek.

Despite the healing power of free expression, the clay sculptures reveal hidden traumas, unfulfilled wishes, and frustrations. The workshop has become a sort of Pandora's Box. The sculptures are no longer willing objects. They have become autonomous and dominate the situation, as if having applied a 'divide and rule' strategy.

The Frigate (2007) is also primarily a filmed portrait. Here too we find the same emphasis on the gaze. In this film though, nearly everyone has the same aggressive paranoid expression; on the one hand, obscenely directed at the female character/victim, on the other hand, fixated on the miniature frigate of the film's title. With most of the male characters the gaze comes not from the eye, but remains suspended (staring). Contrarily, the female character possesses an empty gaze directed downwards. One of the characters stares through a video camera. He sits so close to his subject that the camera cannot be anything other than an extension of a blind stare.

The dark miniature ship is nevertheless the hub of all power relations. Immediately and suddenly the ship appears, emerging from an inner darkness. Like a sort of black star that absorbs every look and hypnotizes its viewers. The way in which all the characters move obsessively round this miniature ship, and the dark appearance of the ship itself, are in a way reminiscent of the meteorite that is stored in the Kaaba in Mecca; a dark stone originating from the universe, wrapped in a black cube, toward which an entire religious world is directed. Both enjoy the same untouchable status.

If the characters in *Der Schlamm von Branst* are under the influence of the clay sculptures, in *The Frigate* it is as if the different characters follow commands that they have received from the miniature ship. Behind alternating positions of power, of

which the female character is always the (sexual) victim, the frigate apparently seems to be stabbing the ultimate master manipulator.

Halfway through the film is a mesmerizing scene in which detailed shots of the model ship merge into one another by way of geometrical patterns, accompanied by dramatic, atonal organ music. And the film ends with a similar scene in which the hypnotic geometry seems to have won over the characters.

In *The Frigate* as in *Der Schlamm von Branst*, even if the objects are not performing as receivers, the characters are most certainly transmitters. A hierarchy is clearly assigned to the characters by the objects. In this way, the ship and the sculptures seem identical to the aforementioned organigram; they are its extensions.

More than with the clay sculptures, it is clear with the miniature frigate that in this context it's more accurate to talk about Things than about objects. The Thing is that which no longer symbolizes anything and where in most cases any attempt at understanding is thwarted. The Thing is still closest of all to the monstrous, with which it shares the inability to be allocated an actual name. The Thing can take on the form of a miniature ship as well as a clay sculpture, but that's only form. Like in the horror film *The Thing* (John Carpenter) in which a small, shapeless something, like a meteorite that has fallen from outer space, is then is able to take on any form. The frigate and the clay sculptures represent nothing; they just are, and their being is mandatory. Their attitude is imperative.

For this exhibition, the original floor of the exhibition halls was covered with vinyl identical to that used in the foyer of the gallery and in other parts of the bank building. In addition, the exhibition halls of Culturgest have now been rebuilt in such a way that the six originally separate rooms are re-divided into two parallel routes, in each of which three rooms spill over into one another in a stepped fashion. Throughout the entire exhibition, the descending space, together with the resonance of the amorphous screeching and imposing organ music used in the films, reinforces the idea of a systematic internment.

To be found in the first spaces are, respectively, the sculptures from *Der Schlamm von Branst* and the photos of the model ship from *The Frigate*. The photos show front, rear and side views of the miniature ship, and are taken with a flash, which fully flattens the black ship. The darkness from which the frigate appeared is the body of the ship itself; a black hole. The photos show the frigate as the formless Thing at which the eye stares blindly.

Neither the clay sculptures exhibited nor the photos can be considered purely as props from, or references to, the films. In the work of de Gruyter and Thys, Things always appear more self-conscious (and independent) than humans. The blank characters/actors possibly more aptly fulfill the role of props on loan than the objects themselves.

As is emblematic of the entire oeuvre of de Gruyter and Thys, their films basically know no dramatic structure and a catharsis or conclusion is never present. At the end of the film nothing crucial has changed. The oppressiveness of this continuity is best translated in their vision of the end of the world: everyone goes home, sits down and waits. It is unspectacular but literally overwhelming and final. *Pandemonium Internatum finalis*.

Exhibition

Curator

Miguel Wandschneider

Production coordination

Mário Valente

Production

António Sequeira Lopes

Paula Tavares dos Santos

Set-up coordination

Fernando Teixeira

Set-up

André Lemos

André Tasso

Heitor Fonseca

Laurindo Marta

Maria Soares

Sérgio Gato

Sílvia Santos

Brochure

Texts

Jos de Gruyter, Harald Thys /

Katia Anguelova, Andrea Wiarda

Michael Van den Abeele

Translation

Jodie Hruby (pp. 13-18)

Coordination

Marta Cardoso

Revision

John Elliott

Printing

Maiadouro

Design

Gráficos do Futuro

© 2009, Fund. CGD - Culturgest

© of the works reproduced:
the artists; of the texts: the authors

Talk with Jos de Gruyter, Harald Thys and Miguel Wandschneider

Saturday, 24 October, 4:30 pm

Screening of films by the artists

Saturdays, 7 November, 19 December, 6 pm · Small Auditorium

Guided tours by Miguel Wandschneider

Saturdays, 7 November, 19 December, 4:30 pm

Guided tours

Sundays, 8 November, 6 December, 6:30 pm

Monday to Friday, from 11 am to 7 pm (last admission at 6:30 pm)

Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holidays, from 2 pm to 8 pm (last admission at 7:30 pm). Closed on Tuesdays.

Information: +351 21 790 51 55 · www.culturgest.pt · CGD building, Rua do Arco do Cego, 1000-300 Lisbon

24 October – 23 December 2009
