

What is hidden, forgotten, cast away, or overlooked in the day-to-day operations of a cultural institution? How does one make tangible the container of knowledge that envelops the factual succession of exhibitions and publications? Can artists become active and responsible co-creators of institutions, their politics, and representations?

Following Witte de With's 25th year anniversary, Rotterdam-based artist duo Bik Van der Pol is invited by Witte de With Director Defne Ayas to highlight what might otherwise become lost in both the history of the institution as well as art's history in the city of Rotterdam. Paying close attention to the socio-economic and political context in which the institution was created, and departing from the belief that cultural institutions and their legacies are as much made up of stories, ephemeral objects, and subtle traces, Bik Van der Pol's process can be likened to a long term forensic investigation that examines, tests and actively exposes that which lies concealed in the folds of history.

Titled *WERE IT AS IF*, the collaboration between Bik Van der Pol and Witte de With, which commenced in June 2015, unfolds during the exhibition period, and is carried out in close dialogue with many agents (among them staff members and artists), who plunge into the institute's rich exhibition history collaboratively, reenergizing the work of artists' such as John Ahearn, Jef Geys, Ken Lum, Antoni Muntadas, Eugenio Dittborn, Eleanor Bond, John Knight, and Allan Sekula. Equating seemingly-in-the-fringes-material – leftovers, support structures, plans, notes, stories, and witness reports – to the level of artworks, and so exploring the viability of approaching 'archival document' as 'art', and 'art' as 'source material', the artists revive histories preserved in the documentation of exhibitions at Witte de With, such as *L'oeuvre a-t-elle lieu?* (1994), *The Rotterdam Project* (1998), *Hortus Conclusus/Breeze of AIR* (2001), *Tracer* (2004), and *Melanchotopia* (2011).

This particular search, however, does not stem from a seemingly omnipresent nostalgic desire to revisit the 1990s but is sparked instead by an understanding that much remains active yet unnoticed in the layers of the institute's past. Stories and (un-)realized artistic and social projects are brought to light as Bik Van der Pol extend the premises of the investigation beyond the white walls of the institute itself, turning to the cities' forgotten or disappeared crevices which have stood as departure points for artists working at Witte de With, such as the Perron Nul (Platform Zero) (1987 – 1994), a former methadone distribution center and safe haven for drug-users near Rotterdam train station, as well as the closed down 'tippelzone' (streetwalking area) at the Keileweg (1994 – 2005), where the divergent worlds of sex workers, protesting citizens, and artist initiatives – including Kaus Australis and Kunst & Complex – clashed repeatedly.

In Bik Van der Pol's words,

“to resist memory loss and to avoid falling into the trap of repetition, conservatism or even fundamentalism, people's activities (which after all make and determine history) must first be consumed and digested. In this way, progression and change can truly be generated and made possible.”

To this Director Defne Ayas adds,

“This examination is an attempt on our part to create a mental space for examining the potential of a cultural institution – to (re)perceive itself, to reclaim, reconstitute and recalibrate her connection to the context in which she was created. Our partnership with Bik Van der Pol insists on the rich history of Rotterdam not only as a hub of logistics and trade but also as an intellectual hub, while embracing the urgency to respond to the current momentum that brands Rotterdam as the “destination city” for art and architecture. It is our aim to make available our rich source material for new types of research and visual and textual production as to rewire possibilities through the informed eyes of artists.”

For the duration of the exhibition, Witte de With invites several guests to give readings into the methodologies and choices on display.

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