

BIK VAN DER POL

Something strange, something beautiful

On 14 September, the artist duo Bik Van der Pol, always on the lookout for the positive and the optimistic, will launch the Evoluon's flying saucer. 'We believe in the power of the imagination.'

Bert Mebius

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Bik Van der Pol is a collaborative partnership between the artists Liesbeth Bik and Jos van der Pol. Their collaboration began in 1995 in Rotterdam's Crooswijk district, where they were both involved in the establishment and development of the Duende studio complex. Their first joint work, The Kitchen Piece, was created there. It was an attempt to escape the loneliness of the studio and their dissatisfaction with their original professions (Bik was a painter, Van der Pol a sculptor). Not long after its first presentation at Duende, The Kitchen Piece was exhibited at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. In an interview in the art magazine Tubelight, they said: 'We also created it because we were constructively and good-naturedly dissatisfied with the art world. Out of optimistic anger, we wanted to show something different from yet another exhibition for a limited circle of well-meaning friends and art lovers. We found the art world so closed and self-absorbed; we wanted to break through that. We wanted to spark the discussions we were having elsewhere too, by creating a space for them.'

'Place', or 'site', is a crucial term for Bik Van der Pol. But 'place' does not imply a fixed location. Their studio, for example, has long since ceased to be a studio; it is more of an office, a home base they only visit from time to time. They come up with ideas whilst on the move. And they are on the move a great deal. They estimate that eighty to ninety per cent of their work is done abroad. Not only is 'place' not a fixed location, but a place is also something elusive. On their website, they quote the two definitions given by the Oxford Dictionary for 'site'. Firstly, a site is a place where, for example, a building stands or stood. Secondly, it is a place where something happens, where something takes place, where something is experienced.

The introduction to their website, which is designed like a book, is also an introduction to their work in general, and to what 'place' means within it. In summary: 'Our work constantly fluctuates between the momentary and the enduring. It embodies the indeterminate, changeable nature of projects and working methods.'

'It is a platform that is constantly in a state of becoming, an active construction for a way of thinking.'

For Bik Van der Pol, Be(com)ing Dutch undoubtedly means: being Dutch is equivalent to becoming Dutch.

The Kitchen Piece can still be regarded as exemplary of their work. It is no coincidence that the monograph on their work published by NAI Publishers in 2005 is titled *With Love from The Kitchen*. The Kitchen Piece was an exact replica of the kitchen unit in their attic in the Duende complex, complete with working taps, gas and coffee machine. It was their own kitchen, yet not quite. But most importantly: The Kitchen Piece was the sort of place where you could pull up a chair for a good conversation about art and other matters of importance, to discover ‘that the world really is bigger than the studio, gallery and museum’. Elsewhere they say: ‘The Kitchen Piece is about possibilities and about a potential that you share with one another. About differences and kinship.’

The terms ‘presentation’ and ‘seeing’, as used so matter-of-factly in the first paragraph of this piece, are misplaced in relation to Bik Van der Pol’s work. ‘Presentation’ and ‘seeing’ presuppose a separation between artwork and audience. Such a distinction does not exist in their work. The audience (yet another term that is misplaced) is part of the work, participates in the work, is an integral part of it. But what Bik and Van der Pol offer is not entertainment, not attractions like those in an amusement park; they do not necessarily make things easy for the audience. Anyone wishing to enjoy the work must think, read texts, join in the conversation, and sometimes even stay overnight – as in *Sleep with Me*, which has been staged in various locations in and outside Europe since 1997.

In the interview in **Tubelight**, they say: ‘Anyone in the public who wants to engage with art also has a responsibility. You consume art differently from other things. A car is not a work of art, and the Lijnbaan is not the same as the Boijmans. Yet the tendency to view such disparate things as extensions of one another is growing ever stronger, certainly here in the Netherlands. Art is barely given the chance to become something, to develop. That is the flip side of democracy, in which we all have a say, even when we have nothing to say. You can see where that leads in the public space. It no longer seems to belong to anyone. The utopian vision with which it was shaped in the last century is fading. Knowledge and memory are fading. That is a reality we are keen to work with, which we investigate and explore.’

In a text written for their presentation *Pay Attention*, held last year at the Van Abbe Museum, critic Raimundas Malasauskas states: ‘A primary activity of many contemporary artists is the dissemination of knowledge.’ Bik and Van der Pol put it this way: ‘The transmission of knowledge and memories as a potential necessary for the emergence of dialogue and a certain degree of understanding and insight—that is one of our primary aims.’ For Bik Van der Pol, this can also involve disseminating the ideas of other artists. In *Pay Attention*, they included works by, among others, Joseph Beuys, On Kawara and Bruce Nauman. *Sleep with Me* was structured around the presentation of Andy Warhol’s film *Sleep*. And a work always relates, if not in its original concept then certainly in its form, to the place where it is exhibited. ‘Site sensitivity and negotiation at an institutional and intimate, local level’ is how Bik Van der Pol describe it.

Bik Van der Pol’s contribution to *Be(com)ing Dutch* will also involve audience participation. Indeed, the work will essentially consist of the audience itself, and the energy it generates. The work of another artist—in this case, an architect—will also play a key role. For *Close Encounters*, they are inviting the public to come to the Evoluon in Eindhoven on 14 September to try, through a collective mental effort of will, to detach this flying-saucer-shaped structure

from its base and send it flying away. Bik Van der Pol: 'The Evoluon is, of course, a metaphor. It stands for the positive, the optimistic. In 1966, when it was built, 'the other' was still sexy and exciting: the first migrant workers, UFOs, visitors from space, aliens. Now it's completely different. 'The other' has become strange and scary. Did you know that the immigrants who came to Eindhoven back then have just as fond memories of the Evoluon as we locals who went there on school trips? We want to bring that positivity back to mind and revive it.'

Their research into the Evoluon led them, among others, to fellow travellers in time such as Steven Spielberg (*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*), Jean Leering with his policy as director of the Van Abbemuseum (the importance he attached to social engagement) and C.G. Jung. In his 1958 work *Ein moderner Mythos von Dingen die am Himmel gesehen werden*, flying saucers are described as representations of the collective subconscious, as projections of the unconscious, caused by repressed religious needs.

Bik Van der Pol: 'Did you know that saucer is loose on its base? It really is. So it must be possible to get it into the air with combined mental energy.'

Do they really believe that? Bik Van der Pol: 'We believe in the power of imagination.'

And if it doesn't work? 'Then all those people were part of a temporary community with a shared intention. A community of people who all wanted the same thing. Something strange, something beautiful. Isn't that a wonderful result in itself?'