

Married by Powers, interview Carole Boulbes with Bik Van der Pol

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with contributions d'Alain Bernardini, Bik Van der Pol, Carole Boulbes, Jean de la Ciotat, Dominique Gonzalez Foerster, Simon Lamuniere, Pierre Leguillon, M/M, Alexandra Midal, France Valliccioni...

Lots of new ways have been tried to bring modern and contemporary art to the notice of a wider audience and to 'liven up' the public collections in museums.

For at least ten years now one of the most widespread methods has been to ask the artists to produce pieces in 'reaction' to one of the more or less well-known works in the museum's collection. Sometimes artists have even been asked to make a selection so that works from a public collection can be shown in a different way. With this in mind it was interesting to ask Liesbeth Bik and Jos Van der Pol their views. This pair of Dutch artists, already famous for shifting existing locations to another setting (Kitchen, Shower and Bookshop from 1995 to 1996), intervened in a French establishment to question the idea of a public collection and of curating an exhibition.

*Can you explain the idea behind your "InterAction", "Reclaiming a space" held in Spring 2002 by the Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain du Nord Pas de Calais in Dunkerque?*

'Reclaiming a Space' runs through our art practice like a thread. It is also the title of one of our pieces: Proposition for Reclaiming a Space (1997), a reconstruction of the first gallery of Konrad Fischer in Dusseldorf. With this piece, which is almost like a homage, we enlightened his attitude of inviting artists to create and become part of a circle of friendship (one of the early 'networks'), to make site-specific work, thus focussing rather on mental capital and the value of connecting with others instead of just sending in the objects. Later we developed this piece in an unlimited edition, a do-it-yourself- kit, available to start your own art space. In general 'reclaiming a space' tries to reclaim a space for discours, thinking and reflecting, a 'niche' so to say, a space we miss. By putting this discursive space in a framework, on a platform, we create the necessary space to revibe, view and experience specific situations.

The new project we developed for the FRAC is Model City, consists of a scale model of the now deserted housing area of BP in Dunkerque, 'la cité des ingenieurs', and deals with ideals - and their ambiguity - of the early 20th century western thinking in urban and

industrial planning. A scale model is normally preceding the architectural reality, to give a preview, and to create a thinking model of how to organise public space, as a model for imagination. This model however is functioning the other way around, by providing procedures of rethinking reality that is almost disappearing, in order to allow us to rethink the future. The BP area is a city of dreams, imbued with optimism and a strong belief in the increasing development of mankind, endless economical growth and welfare for everybody, with the production of oil as the motor behind this. Model City reclaims space for questions and comments, since an open discussion on this area appeared to be a sensitive issue. Disguised as an architectural form, it raises questions about the nature of living, intentions, institutionalisation, 'capitalistic economic space' and the public and private sphere. Model City takes a critical status, by placing memory back in the archive of knowledge again, using the space of this model as a vehicle for recovering and tracing this memory and by creating a discursive platform. Both on the website of the FRAC and in the exhibition, a 'boîte des idées' created space for contributions dealing with the questions the project is focussing on. In collaboration with the FRAC, public meetings including a bus tour to 'cité des ingénieurs' were set up to discuss the area. Model City hopefully 'expanded and explored the field', thus becoming a motor for thought and ideas.

*For "Married by Powers", your second foray into the FRAC collection held in the Rotterdam TENT. during November 2002 you used 150 works by 73 international artists. Where did you get the amazing idea of moving these works from Dunquerque and showing them in another space? Can you describe what sort of exchange or co-operation you had to establish?*

Married by Powers is, for this moment, the outcome of observing the samenesses and differences between FRAC and TENT. FRAC has a few comprehensive missions: to build a collection of contemporary art, to make this collection public by organising manifestations and exhibitions in a variety of institutes and other places, to produce projects which deal with new forms of interaction between art and public. FRAC has an interesting and exciting collection, but, deliberately, no large scale museum building to exhibit this collection. Instead of that, FRAC generates the production of art works and incorporates as its mission to bring the works 'into the world'. The invitation to work with their collection is a direct and logic result of FRAC's mission.

TENT. is a huge white-wall space with no collection. TENT. runs a very active and lively program of events, short exhibitions and temporary connections with Rotterdam based, national and international artists and curators as well as with other disciplines, scheduled

in a variable flexible timeline: almost an opposite mentality to conserving and collecting. Together, TENT. and FRAC provide a powerful resource of human, cultural and material capital and energy.

Both regions have as their main economic activity transport: transport of goods and people through a network of roads, train connections and world harbours such as Rotterdam, Dunkerque, Antwerp to the rest of Europe and from there back to the world again.

Leaning on the principle of communicating vessels and the fact that a French transport company would be the main sponsor of Married by Powers, we used the logic of transport and its parameters. Transport connects communities and deals with surplus on each side, it reverses positions and relationships, and turns it upside down: inversion by moving things around. Working on this project we were less interested in creating an exhibition of objects 'per se' than understanding this opportunity to create dynamic alternatives. The selection of 150 works we made from the FRAC collection was therefore put on transport to TENT., where its spaces would be filled by the collection. Partly as a depot: in crates, partly exhibited and unpacked, thus emphasising on the organisation, the activity of collecting and its mechanisms of longing, purchasing, archiving, transporting and making public. For all of this we took much inspiration from the imagination created by Marcel Broodthaers' *Le Département des Aigles du Musée d'Art Moderne*.

*Would it be true to say that you set up exhibitions "in progress" by joining together different personalities and that your art lies precisely in making this connection?*

Yes, you could say that. We apply different strategies dealing with, for example, functionality, usability and site sensitivity. We are concerned with interaction at an institutional and intimate, local level, aiming to improve situations, add what is missing, highlight what is in the dark and to open rather than close. Our working method is based on co-operation and we use this as a platform for various kinds of communicative activities. Exploring and activating such platforms is one of the main threads in our work.

With, for example, *The Bookshop Piece* [1996, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, and 1998, Gallery Greene Naftali, New York] and *Proposition for Reclaiming a Space* [EAST, Norwich, 1997] we re-introduced the discourse on and the practice of art into the very same arena where art is shown.

And with the group Nomads & Residents ( a forum for visitors in the arts: making connections, supporting networks, setting up meetings), of which we are one of the initiators, we create a platform for presentations by artists, critics, curators, architects, and others. [[www.nomadsresidents.org](http://www.nomadsresidents.org)].

Circulation of knowledge and re-use of existing and left-over spaces, forms and situations are important strategic tools to critically and constructively address 'normal' situations. Not by adding yet another new idea to the cycle of production and consumption, but by revising and re-activating an existing situation. Reconstruction as opposed to destruction, not by 'doing it again', but aiming to leading to an improved reconstruction, which is something new, since it may - hopefully - generate new experiences and possibilities. This re-using does not stem from nostalgic desire, but is sparked by the understanding that things lie concealed in the folds of recent history which have to be actively exposed in order for us to be able to move on. To resist memory loss and to avoid falling into the trap of repetition, conservatism or even fundamentalism, people' s activities must, in some way, be consumed and digested, to allow change to be generated and activated.

*You invited 9 young curators (collaborating in groups and individuals) to pick (display) or reject (leave in their wrappings) from the 150 works in the FRAC' s public collection. Are you trying to break with the traditional procedures for selecting and displaying works of art?*

First of all, we don't feel that leaving objects in their crates means that these works are rejected. The storages of the museums of the world are filled with objects in their crates. Many of them never, or only sometimes leave their storage room. Involving this collection of 150 pieces, all packed in protective cases and material means: the depot as image. The content of the cases is indicated by the list of names of the artists, titles and technical descriptions of the work. In some cases this list will evoke a notion of the piece, for many of the works may be part of some sort of individual or even collective memory.

By showing these pieces in their crates, we wanted to make the phenomena of 'collecting' transparent. Not as a negative thing but as something exciting, something one can travel through, explore and discover things, as on a voyage. Ofcourse the space of the depot was accessible for the public. The collection, also when present in crates, deals with very relevant issues as memory and imagination. These issues are related to the activity of viewing, reflecting and thinking about things. Choosing from that depot implies consciousness of the content of these crates or at least a sense of what might be in the crate.

It also demands a certain capacity and engagement from our partners. This group actually existed out of not only a small collaborating group of student curators but also artists, an architect, urban planner, dance-choreographer and a filmmaker and as our 'co-curators', we asked them to consider, to imagine and rethink from their own experience what they personally, and for very different reasons, feel is important to present now and in this specific context.

*Would you rather favour the notion of an international network and opening?*

Married By Powers dealt with the significance of an international art collection such as this one, which has many pieces of artists whose works we have seen frequently in many western museums and/or big shows the past twenty years.

We asked ourselves: what does it mean: a collection, how do its individual pieces determine our vision on art, what do they mean for contemporary perception in a changing world and in what ways can a collection be valued and activated, beyond the usual practice of exhibitions and associated publications. And, not the least: what do these objects mean to the present generation of young artists, designers, architects?

Therefore we decided to invite these young colleagues to ask them to choose in their turn, from our selection of 150 pieces and to state their reasons for the choices they made.

They are all active in the broader field of the arts and come, besides from The Netherlands, from different parts of the world. They are today's and tomorrow's cultural producers.

Their choices were each presented during three days in the space adjacent to the space where the depot was installed. Their motivations are all recorded on video and together with the pieces in their crates on show in the depot space, thus forming an ever-increasing shadow collection, while the exhibited choices change all the time. Sometimes pieces would return, sometimes in a different context and certainly with a different motivation.

*What has public reaction been to these interventions, one after another, that can transform a public collection into a private one temporarily for the benefit of a bunch of curators? How does the public interact with your works in progress?*

Mediation is an important issue, not only in projects like this, but, we feel, in general. In many other projects we did, this is a very important thing, and we are very conscious to deal with it very specifically. Therefore we keep a strict direction over our projects, and

formulate the scenario very precisely, we would like to compare this attitude with how John Cassavetes used to direct his films: being very precise in order to let chance and improvisation being able to flourish. The video recordings we made from the interviews are one form of mediating, the information posters with the complete list of selected works another. For security reasons, there was always a person of TENT. present in the exhibition space, who, in that way, also casually could and actually did inform the. We also informed the persons at the reception desk very precisely, and we were there every three days to take down, install and do another interview. We feel the project was quite imbedded in the daily practice of TENT., and maybe due to our commitment it was also a project that the people of TENT. would want to take care of. Besides this, due to its set up, TENT. is an informal space, where people seem to feel comfortable. So it appeared to be quite natural for the public to spend a lot of time wandering through the depot and the presentations, but also to play the football table of Tiravanija, to have a drink from his fridge and to browse through the archive a student from university had made for us, which consisted of text, reviews and newspaper cuttings on each of the 150 artists.

*Can you describe the role played by the Rotterdam TENT. internet site and the "Model city" project in the development of your exhibition project at the FRAC?*

For 'Model City' the website functioned as another platform next to the exhibition, another entry to the project, and as such another way of getting involved, to express an opinion, to show a point of view on something. We feel that 'exhibition as a tool' not always covers the range you would like to reach out to, if ever possible. By extending the possible intervention to the website of the FRAC, people could, in theory, have access. Also after an exhibition has physically ended. We feel it is quite important to lengthen the timeline of attention beyond opening and ending of a show, and to explore different intensities since art has to compete more and more with other media. Immediacy and intensity therefore has to claim - reclaim - more territories.

For Married by Powers, we used the FRAC website as an archive and resource: all 150 pieces we selected were accessible through their website. A side effect of this was that our partners, but also the public, had to be very aware of formats, techniques and sizes of pieces, since all pieces, because of the jpeg format, became equal in size and flatness. Evidently, they also jumped to other sites in order to find more information on specific pieces or artists, explicitly using the internet as a tool. Again another form of mediation. When internet is logically used and incorporated in the daily practice and thinking of

institutes, it will function as a very active and extra platform next to publications and exhibitions, with its own specific qualities. To which the public, when interested, should be able to easily access, comment on and contribute to. In the end, this could influence our very personal choices and in such a way reflect back on how we think about publications, exhibitions and pieces of art.