

Open Issues

number one

- ☉ You should be able to make money and hold on to it. ☉
- ☉ You will have gold pieces by the bushel. ☉
- ☉ You love sports, horses and gambling but not to excess. ☉
- ☉ Your present plans are going to succeed. ☉
- ☉ You are always welcome in any gathering. ☉
- ☉ You will attract cultured and artistic people to your home. ☉
- ☉ Don't let friends in. ☉
- ☉ Work calmly and... ☉
- ☉ hard work will soon pay ☉ on you. ☉
- ☉ You have a deep appreciation of the arts and music. ☉
- ☉ Nature, time and patience are the three great physicians. ☉
- ☉ never hesitate to tackle the most difficult problems. ☉
- ☉ will be unusually successful in business. ☉
- ☉ The physician he makes well. ☉
- ☉ You are contemplative and analytical by nature. ☉
- ☉ You have a keen sense of humor

“The greater your risk, the less you pay and the more you receive. This is or should be an incentive to participate, to take extravagant chances, to execute daring acts of faith on behalf of your beliefs and in advocacy of your particular marriage of desire and esteem. Try to think of it as a dynamic system, a chaotic flow generated by a perpetually negotiated interplay...”
-Dave Hickey

The Artists Interviewed in this issue:

1. Libia Pérez de Siles de Castro and Ólafur Árni Ólafsson
2. Bik van der Pol
3. Jan Adriaans
4. InnBetween
5. Wietse Eeken
6. Jennifer Stillwell and Amanda Ross-Ho



From the project *Un elemento más*, 2002, Malaga

January 05, 2004

Interview with Libia Pérez de Siles de Castro and Ólafur Árni Ólafsson

S.R. Kucharski: From what I know of your work, you react on a place, and possibly on the people living in that place, to generate an installation or a book that is reflective of the experience of that place—you experience it by being there on a day-to-day basis. From working together as a duo, can you talk about your working process when you are invited to a specific place or city?

Libia: I want to say one thing, about the beginning, how you formulated what we are doing, because there is an important aspect of what we do that is missing. That is that there is a vision developing that goes to all those places, which is also an attitude. This vision/attitude is as important as what research we do in the place.

Olafur: There is a similar approach to all our projects. We are working on an ongoing research which we take with us, a framework—we have certain desires or certain ideas or things we want to try out, and what we know is that some will fit better to the place. It is an organic process. We know some of our ideas are not relevant. But, because we are also going to a place that we don't know entirely, and also, even if we do know the place, we are working in such an organic way that there are always some ideas that have to wait. Some aspects of our work have had to have several chances before they finally come out. As example, we have experienced in Istanbul an activation of the space...the place we were exhibiting was very busy, located on a shopping street in a city 12 or 15 million, and the place was extremely accessible, there was no lobby there was no entrance to pay, you open the door and you are inside the exhibition space. And for us, it was a reason for us to work specifically with the visitors, because we knew we would get 400 people a day.

For instance, Clay Language (<http://www.odaprojesi.com>) was an earlier project manifested in Istanbul, with Oda Projesi, an artists' initiative. That affected the second project, 20 Minus Minutes in Platform Garanti contemporary art center ("http://www.garanti.com.tr/anasayfa/garantiyi_taniyin/garanti_sanat_galerisi.html" http://www.garanti.com.tr/anasayfa/garantiyi_taniyin/garanti_sanat_galerisi.html). There we used the space in a multifarious way, as a place to present what we had been doing in the city, in the Oda Projesi and as a place for encounters, an environment that was still transforming, through actions, talks...while including the visitors in the process. We started with the Clay Language, and we reused it, the remains of the project plus the documentation, and we re-cooked the project so to say...

Libia: A part of the space we worked in, in Istanbul, was devoted to the Clay Language, but the entire exhibition space was a multifarious space. When we are talking about the aspects that we are researching, these are always environmental or chosen aspects related to life, to people, how life and places grow, or die, or behave, in different environments, and the research is often on interiors and exteriors, so we *choose* places (if we can, as much as one can choose). And we work outside, for example researching spaces

in the city that are at the edge or the leftover of a site, that isn't being given attention to. But it can also be a main/crowded street, where we become busy with other things... We find, for instance, a "forgotten" place interesting because of the tension one experiences in the place, because you can have a time-based experience, they have history, or the spaces are in a transformation state, something is going to happen there. But often these spaces we work in are socially or politically undermined, or frozen (waiting for business) and you can meet all kinds of social or political tensions there. Beyond that what interests us is how life makes it's way in possible and impossible ways. Sometimes these places offer a kind of a free zone moment in time. But that can happen also in a very crowded place, where much is happening at the same time, in a continuous flow.

SRK: Are you finding in your research, in the last few places you have worked in, that your installations reflect this kind of "vacancy"?

Libia: Not in all the projects we did last year, but more in the previous years. As a young artist, you are often going to the places you can be, looking for possibilities and those places are also leftover places, and often are offering new possibilities for artists. Our work is about reveling connections between spaces or situations. For us, it is also some kind of passion or love for the negative parts of things, for the leftovers, or new spaciousness, or just differences, things that are (or we believe to be) maybe less easy going. But we like as much really full places, or also rural places, villages. You are not suppose to like all this at once, like if you are busy with the urban then you are not suppose to be busy with the rural at the same time, but we do, it just takes a longer time for realizing it all.

Exterior environments are made out of a lot of things, one being open space, and in the space there are even more things, there is life, processes... And we try to point out what we find relevant in relationships between different elements from a specific environment, for example.

If you think on the immaterial part of our work, or the ideological part or attitude of the work, we are busy with parts of life, of society, that are maybe not necessarily neglected, but different. If it is an art institution, then we go into a dialogue that may touch aspects of the context of that institution. We always try to transform the space, create an energy that is hosting the ideas or the project presented, to make holes (a means to open up the space to a new, or other situation), and we are very busy with making the environments porous. That is a very important thing in our work, in the way we relate to things.

Olafur: That is in many ways an important essence or core of the whole work, a kind of porosity.

SRK: So that things can filter in or out, between the interior and exterior environments?

Libia: Exactly. But not only in and out, also between, through other type of borders. It is about breathing, fun, creating space for doubt, for exchange, for flow, sensitivity.

SRK: The first thing I notice when you are talking about your work is the "research," or

use of the word research. When you research things, are you working together, or do you find you are going off on your personal research and bringing them together?

Olafur: We do both.

Libia: If you know we are two artists working together, coming from such different backgrounds, like the very North of Europe and the very South of Europe, and living in a third country, and being from a different gender, all these spatial interests, or environmental interests, and how life develops in the environments, and what space we have to work together being two people...it is a constant life experience with space and the perception of it and how people can live, behave in it, how we make space for each other, or not, for more voices and for displaced voices. This is something that is needed, when working like this—how to make space that is available for differences, and how to understand your own background and the places we are going to. So it is like a continuous antho- and topographical study.

Olafur: In all the places we have been traveling to we have related to them in a personal way, or with this, maybe I mean also in a direct way.

Libia: Another aspect of our inquiry is that we are thinking of a porous environment that gives a possibility to give space to things that are different in the same space, looking for inclusion...lets say to question that which is established (for example, homogeny) when it's needed, also to play with it, it should not be untouchable. We aim to question our perception of how things have to be, or are, and could alternatively be. That is something that you always experience very strongly when you are a foreigner. Because when you are a foreigner, you always have the perception of the "other" with you, that's why we are busy with making space for the foreign (or the strange). And that brings you together with a sense of hierarchies—which things are taking more space than other things; which things are taking little space but are actually directing all the other spaces and so forth. And that is something we are continuously bringing into our work and discussing in the exhibition spaces in which we work. We are always taking these multifunctional/dysfunctional spaces to reflect on a structure, one that is non-hierarchical, and that relates to our idea of being porous.

SRK: It sounds like you're saying that one of the benefits of working together, coming from different cultures is you now have a special "foreigners" dialogue.

Libia: Yes, because in that moment, you come to two things that are important to our work: to not take for granted the place you go and not to take for granted the people you are going to work with and then the people that are going to experience the work after. We want to be able to communicate and work with people that are in different positions in society, and make holes through that, as in making holes through cultures to meet each other. We are all learning from each other. Here we can come back to the project Clay Language, which was an example of making holes, which was to invent a language that is enriched and contaminated by different languages and different values within the project. You look for things that are universal, or common, in the concrete experi-

ences (in the bridges between things, people in the encounters etc...). Through the Clay Language you confront (discuss with a question) a certain group of people. One can shift values and also sometimes the language.

SRK: After collaborating together, working with language, place and porous-ness between cultural strata, do you find there are other artists dealing with these subjects?

Olafur: Yes, of course, but in many different ways and situations. In Istanbul we worked with a three-artist initiative. When we met them, we had already a very strong feeling we wanted to work very directly with others. We met them a few days after we arrived, and we found they had a very strong interest in inviting artists to come and work in their living conditions, so it fit to our program quite precisely...so in a way we all were looking for each other. For us it was extremely interesting to have a group of people to work with. We talked a lot about collective authorship, which is anyway something we are busy with, interested in, in different ways. Not just in terms of working with other artists, but working with people, and the both of us working together.

SRK: It is interesting, this idea of collective authorship. It seems you are open to it in your own practice, to work with people, artists, organizers, administrators, etc. But how does collective authorship work outside of your art projects?

Libia: That is very different depending on the place, situation, people etc. It is related to each project, that you think in this project you want to work with (more) people, or not, and in which way. And then there is this other collectiveness, that develops from organizing your work related to the place were you live/work.

Olafur: One example is a project we helped organize in Groningen before we moved to Rotterdam, called 22. It started from how we distrust many things—we distrust things that are taken for granted. We want artwork to be more alive, to have more than “agreed upon” exhibition space. There are certain things that have to go beyond that space. While in Groningen, we had been thinking that there are many good and talented artists but within the city they weren’t being picked up.

Libia: Groningen was much different than Rotterdam, because here you already have artist initiatives, more institutions, galleries, etc—there is already an infrastructure.

Olafur: It was even extremely hard to get a studio, and we never managed to get one, which was quite crazy! Exhibition spaces were showing graduated students or professional artists from the West, from Rotterdam or Amsterdam. The Groningen Museum wasn’t paying attention to young artists in the region. They would be exhibiting the already established artists from Groningen of 60 or 70 years old, and then international artists. And, there is not really an interest from Rotterdam or Amsterdam or Utrecht of showing young artists from Groningen. So we were thinking, what are we going to do? Start an exhibition space in the basement, or actions in the street? What we did, we were working through this situation in many different contexts, apart from the few places to exhibit within the city. Then one day when there were openings at two of

these Groningen galleries, we started to talk to other local artists, saying let's make our own exhibition.

Libia: It was a manifestation... it was a statement of the state of the young artists there...

Olafur: ...Let's make an exhibition—let's make a project, where this would be the focus, show what is happening, that it would be clear. So one day the group got together, it was quite spontaneous, and what we agreed upon, was that everybody was to be active... that it would be a non-hierarchic structure, that everyone who wanted to be in had to do more than just bring their work. There was no boss. And that was very interesting, and we decided to open the show in three months. We decided to ask for funding in the city and the region but on our own terms and timing, because following the rules would have killed the project. We thought it had to be possible to ask in our own terms, because we did not fit in any of the forms to apply for subsidies, so we asked for a meeting, a dialogue, and let the bureaucratic apparatus understand the aim, situation and proposal. If we would not get the money for this project 22, after reading what the money was supposed to be used for in the first place, then to whom do they want to give it? But the point was, of course, that we were anyway going to manifest the project also without help. That made everything extremely clear. In the end, everything went through and we also made a small book on the project. And we decided not to do it in an existing exhibition space. And if we had gotten an exhibition space, we would only have used it on our own terms.

Libia: The exhibition was located in different spaces throughout the city—an old house from the Middle Ages, an exhibition space, and old house in renovation and in the street. And what was very interesting was we were so determined to do it, finding our way, what would fit best the projects and works, and in a non-hierarchical structure, to see what it would bring. Because when you're a young artist, you are often exhibiting in a group exhibition, where the curator or the organizers are putting the artwork in a certain light. And that's always the case. But let's say then your work, voice, can easily disappear because it is still very fragile, not known, etc... and often then can be put in a light that has actually, maybe nothing to do with your research, but it fits in the concept or theme of the organizer. We thought that was ok, yet not enough—we found it very important reality for the artists to arrange their own work, to manifest what was happening, to arrange an encounter for the artists and the city.

SRK: Do you think that is more or less a part of the work you do now, a balance between your vision versus the structure of the museum/gallery? For example, when you worked in Istanbul, were you simply given a free space or were you also given an idea of what was expected from you?

Libia: In Istanbul, it was actually very good, we had many short talks with the director of the place...but that was what we are interested in also, in discussing things. But it was very good, because he was open, because he got to know the work, and had been following it.

Olafur: He presented himself as open to our working method.

Libia: What he said was that he invited us to really put forward our own context in the space of the institution.

SRK: I wonder if because of that trust in your work, and maybe really understanding what you are trying to accomplish with your installations, his openness with his gallery gave you all the freedom you needed to make new work.

Libia: It always goes with dialogue. At the moment you start to touch on how to transform the space, that you will make holes for other contexts to come in, it turns into a relation to the facility of the place...and then that we would change the physical aspect of the place!...there is a lot of discussion when it becomes physical, when you have to make real holes! People only want to go so far, you know? But, the conceptual or immaterial holes are actually the point.

Olafur: There are moments, at a certain point, where you have to stand your ground. In Istanbul, we mostly had an incredible free hand. Our proposal could actually gain very much from the situation of the place and vice versa, and it is very important to mention this is due to how the institute is being run, that allows such an experiment in a good way. We also look at what curators do with space, how they make certain exhibitions—taking a concept, recreating an environment, installing pieces, distributing ideas.

SRK: Your artwork could be labeled as intermedia, new genre, etc. Since you are working in places that are foreign to you and you often work with people from a foreigners perspective, it seems like much of your installations/publications involve communication, and explaining the way you relate to life in these foreign places...the communication is obviously very important. One could suggest here that you engage the audience in a certain collaborative thought process, as the presence of a viewer within your work completes the work.

Libia: Well, it is not always like that, but there is a dialogue and questioning and sometimes in the discussion there is friction coming with it. And the viewers, they are not always just viewers, but visitors and co-creators of a situation...

I think it is a very interesting point what you're talking about because it is a paradox of course. On the one hand we want to communicate of course, but on the other hand we also, through that communication, want to communicate certain things. And, the trouble begins with the certain things that we are communicating about. Which of course, again, has to do with the way one communicates the things. And that is the moment you get the discussion, because then it has to do with values. Because here you reach the point of ones ideological crossing. And that isn't always steadily defined. For us, our work is very much a vehicle for being in touch with life, and to reflect on life, to experiment with life. It is not only that you are reflecting on it, you are actually really *doing* something with it. And that is a difficult point, because though you are communicating about it, you are doing and saying something that some people won't find so

nice, and will disagree with. And, other people will find nice and embrace it.

SRK: Do you feel your work is addressing something “new” in art practice? That with this preoccupation with social structures, you are treading avant-garde territory, in regards to the context of contemporary art?

Libia: Maybe, it is sometimes a new way, or maybe just another way. At the moment at which you reflect on any situation, and you actually also experiment with the situation, then you also look forward. I think the question about the situation, the different ways you can look at the situation, and the possibilities you can look ahead, is for us the most interesting.

Olafur: But what we often call new, talking about artwork...for example, this whole idea of contemporary, which has become almost like a name for a stream of thought. You are saying avant-garde—maybe we should think about the use of the label “contemporary.” Contemporary has become a significant label for certain types of art. But it is very broad. I would like the discussion on contemporary to be more specific, like using the label “experimental contemporary art,” or the place where this particular use of “contemporary” is coming from, for example. Because I find with the use of the name “contemporary,” many things have become lost. In a way, it is a very conservative use of the word to call something contemporary. As if it has a certain flair of provocation, of being something new, or as something avant-garde. In a way, it is sad, how often something so average, so normal, can be labeled contemporary, as a description of quality of the thing itself.

That is very crazy, the conservative way or use of the term contemporary. How about using a term like, “a global western flavor of a homogeneous gray sophisticated silverdust”?

Libia: In a way, talking about avant-garde, it is the same thing. At a certain point, it becomes such a defined thing, that you have to break out of it again.

SRK: So, it is fair to say that these labels come from a certain point of view? And, a particular Western point of view, and that these definitions are not applicable to certain places in the world?

Olafur: It is something to keep in mind. It is also important to keep in mind the total ambivalence of the word contemporary, because it doesn't mean anything else than just something happening today. And this is what I want to say in relation to the word new or experimental, that artists, all kind of artists that are in history books, were often totally experimental or even laughed at in their time, and people forget that. For me, one of the most important aspects of art, is that it is created in time, that it is made at a time and it is made with a certain amount of uncertainty, and that is the same now as it has been a hundred years ago. - end -



Original kitchen in living space, Jos van der Pol, Rotterdam, *The Kitchen Piece*, 1995



The Bookshop Piece, 1998,
Gallery Greene Naftali, New York



*Capsule Hotels for Information, Dreams,
Brilliant Thoughts and Other Things*,
1999, Rooseum, Malmö



Sleep With Me, 1997, Duende, Rotterdam

Jan. 10th, 2004

Interview with Bik van der Pol

S. R. Kucharski: I am interested in how long your collaboration has been active, and when and why it started. Also, I am interested in how you see the name you use, Bik van der Pol, as an entity in itself, and how that manifested.

Jos van der Pol: It is important to say that our collaboration is closely related to the history of the artist initiative Duende, of which we were one of the initiators. Duende started to exist in 1984...and in the beginning we organized, with many other people, annual shows, open studios, and then later guest studios with a more intensive program of exhibitions and presentations.

Liesbeth Bik: In 1984 there wasn't much going on in this city...there were a few galleries, I think Cockie Snoei was just starting, and the museum Boijmans Van Beuningen did not look to Rotterdam artists. There wasn't much possibility and space for artists to show their work publicly, and that is why so many groups of artists—Kunst & Complex, Stichting B.a.d., Quarantaine (which started in the late 70s), Kaus Australis, Het Wilde Weten and others, started to organize themselves, to create workspaces but also to create platforms to show their work. Rotterdam was, and still is, a good city for artists, because there was a lot of space—schools moving out, factories closing down... So, there was a time, and I think this is typical Rotterdam, that artists could find space in negotiation with the city council. There also was another reason for this need: the art school was very small in terms of space; no studios there, and you shared space with the rest of your class, which was 15 or 20 people, so it was difficult to have a physical space to work in during your study.

Jos: There was a point when a few of us students decided to not go to school anymore. We wanted space, and we found it, and Duende started...the teachers had to come to us...because there was no space at the academy. We were all more or less from one class, and through working together formed the original Duende group. Then in 1994 we had to leave the first building in de Hostedestraat, and after 2 years of hard work, lobbying and searching for another space, we came upon the current building in Crooswijk, which was 4 times bigger than the building before. Funny, because originally we wanted to go smaller...we felt it doesn't work with more than 12 or 15 people. And then we were confronted with a building that can host more than 45 artists!

SRK: When you walked into this new building in 1994, you realized you needed to bring more people in to support the organization....

Jos: Exactly. There was another artist organization also looking for space, called Casco, and we joined together. And then there was still open space! Finally, we ended up with a stable group of people, which of course has changed over time. I think the difference between the old and the new Duende, right from the start, was that we organized ourselves better. With the former Duende building, the situation was always unstable,

so we had to organize ourselves better. To really have a normal opportunity to develop your career, you can't move every year.

Liesbeth: There was again, also a real difference in need between the first Duende and the new...we originally started because there was no platform to exhibit in Rotterdam for young artists, and there was no adequate working space. We combined these two things in a building, the model of the classic artist run space. And you use the capital and possibilities you have—the building, the square meters, the volume, as a place for presentation. To choose this sort of path, you have to collaborate with others. Then, in the late 80's and early 90's, Rotterdam developed many of its current cultural institutes—Witte de With, the Foto Institute, NAI, the Boijmans started to host the city collection, and many new galleries started to appear. This all created new opportunities for established artists and emerging artists to show their work.

But still there wasn't really a situation of interaction with artists working with these institutes, not the possibility for interaction that a self-organised platform such as Duende could provide. Aware of the importance of exchange, we organized our guest studio program more intensely and effectively. We felt, that despite the new platforms coming up in Rotterdam, local artists never got in touch with, for example, artists who came from abroad and exhibited here. Aware of the fact that everyone is always a local somewhere, we wanted to create something, where you could really have generate exchange between artists, on a more equal, or more human level I would say, by inviting and creating an opportunity for artists to stay. Then, people, get to know each other, become friends, the situation opens up, and creates unimaginable possibilities. And it also gives Rotterdam artists a possible chance to look beyond Rotterdam.

SRK: So you were really organizing for people to stay here and be supported. Do you feel your initial collaboration with the Duende group influenced your art practice?

Jos: For us, it was important that we took the opportunity to create our own art situation. By creating this platform, the art world would come to us. Duende was a way of self-empowerment, to challenge the art world, by doing-it-yourself instead of sadly waiting in your studios for the moment of fame. So we started more intensely organizing exhibitions and other activities.

We applied for funding and through that we could also invite young international curators from Sweden, London, Germany and New York City to come and realize a project with artists of their choice, always both from Rotterdam and elsewhere, again to situate local and international artist on the same platform.

Besides that, we realized activities based on our ideas of what we felt was interesting in the art field: intense activities such as a performance weekend, looking at the differences between the '60's and contemporary performance, and a weekend on sound and architecture throughout the whole building. There was always some format or type of issue being explored

Coming back to our specific collaboration, that happened automatically and gradually. In 1994 I had a commission for a project in public space here in Rotterdam, and I discussed it with Liesbeth. We knew each for a long time already, and were always discussed things. With this project however, the borders blurred more, because I got

the commission, but we talked, discussed it together, what I should do. And eventually the project, although under my name, was developed by both of us. For me, that is the moment when the collaboration between us started.

And then 1994, the first guest to come to the Duende guest program, really the first one, was an English artist from London, Peter Fillingham. It was at the time we just entered the new building, and it was a really exciting time, with lots of parties and things going on, new energy. I also decided to live in the building, which was important, because it provided a sort of base for the guests—so that it wasn't just a big lonely building. And then, together with Peter and Liesbeth, we found ourselves in lots of discussions, about all sorts of art and life issues. And they all happened in my kitchen. So at one point, we decided to build an exact copy of my kitchen in Duende, at the opposite side of the attic room. This is the actual physical start of the collaboration between Liesbeth, Peter and myself. It was an 'homage' since my original kitchen had generated so much creativity between us all ...

Lizbeth: In this new and current building, we developed a dramatically different attitude. Before, in the old building, we were constantly harassed by the city council telling us, "you have to leave." And we were always making plans, always trouble shooting. So that meant a lot of wasted time, a huge waste of energy. So when finally we arrived at the new building, we decided to do it all differently; despite the om-niet contract that could force us to leave within two weeks notice, we acted as if it could also be a one hundred years before we would have to leave. We acted as if we were never going to leave, or at least not to be bothered by this or any other piece of paper telling us to go. Immediately, we started the guest studios, because we felt in a building of 40 some people it is really necessary to have fresh wind, continuously, a wind you can't direct, because you don't know who your next guest will be, so you can't really have any prejudices. We thought, well, we really have to create something new for ourselves.

SRK: But it gave you a feeling you can control your own situation, taking over the building, saying this is going to be the place; we are going to work under a like-minded practice, we are going to bring other people in. Even though, like you said, you wanted to keep bringing in fresh wind, Duende could now stay stable—you could reference to what you had done in the past, in order to build onto new things. And I would guess that this gave you, as artists, a real strength. So, from around 1994, this collaboration that is Bik van der Pol, as a name, started with the new Duende building.

Jos: In the beginning actually it was Bik-Fillingham-van der Pol. Like a lawyers office. (laughs...)

Liesbeth: We thought a lot about our name, because we could call it B.F., BFP, or we could use another name which symbolically or metaphorically "covers the load", so to say. But then we thought, no, we are three people, three individual people, we work together, and every one of us that actually has a hand in the thing we do, should be a part of the name. So we started with the three names, exactly and precisely to reflect what was going on in the collaboration, because you can't have a true collaboration without the same kind of investment.

SRK: But this was collaboration about ideas, about manifestations.

Liesbeth: Not only ideas. We wanted to manifest our ideas, and if you want that you also need to invest, engage and make things happen: you need to act, to do, not only have ideas. It started from excitement, from fantasies, dreams...and also from aggression about the city. We thought certain things were (and actually are) wrong, and asked ourselves: why can't we do them differently? You know, the cultural climate is always ten times slower than it should be. So there was a lot of excitement, sometimes out of anger, but always a constructive atmosphere—always with the idea we were going to do something about what we felt was necessary.

Jos: What is important about the starting point of this collaboration is the mentality that you can do it yourself. So the Kitchen Piece, a mirror image of my kitchen in the Duende building, came out of us three individuals thinking that we should recreate this kitchen, and to make it possible for the kitchen to travel, so that it could generate the same kind of energy somewhere else. At first, we placed the copy facing the original in my house, and then after that we would take out the copy and send it on its mission. It would be a fully functional kitchen, but in a different setting. The first venue, which we organized more or less ourselves was in a gallery in London and then it went to the Stedelijk Museum.

Liesbeth: I think we were not afraid. We negotiated a couple of years for a new building, and finally found an run down building that seemed unmanageable. But you realize you can do things with it, you can use it as a tool. All these years we spent negotiating with the politics, the owners, sometimes felt like we were wasting our time, but we learned a lot too. The good thing we learned (and very useful for an artist) is not to be afraid of anything.

SRK: There is also a cultural climate that affords this possibility in Holland. And, the fact that artists can negotiate space from which to manifest ideas and actions, is quite special and unique. It is one of the most interesting things here, particularly in Rotterdam. Rotterdam has such a high concentration of artist's initiatives that re-use space, legally or illegally, and I think this affects the way in which artists make their artwork. This also touches on a personal interest in re-defining the avant-garde in art practice, and specifically in relation to place. The one thing that immediately struck me, being an American artist visiting the Netherlands, was the squatting and do-it-yourself attitude that is afforded to artists here. It is part of a cultural understanding, or at least that is how it appeared to me. It is my desire to talk about this, because it looks like the climate might be changing, in regards to new laws that are trying to make it illegal to squat empty commercial space. Since you have been living here for the last ten years, you have probably seen just as many artists initiatives close as have opened...

Jos: The ones that started in the 80's and 90's are more or less stable, I think...

Liesbeth: And they do change of course—people develop, the ambition changes. For example, I think artist run spaces like Duende are really a proof that this idea of artists

re-using empty space works, and that it does do a lot for the artist's art practice, and for the city, because it is always reciprocal.

It is fair to say, when you are just out of art school, you are looking to create some kind of platform of your own, based on your own ideas, which are and should be different than the ideas of the ones that have come before you. So the existing situation is always changing and that is good.

SRK: Back to what the two of you are working on currently: could one say that the projects you are doing now, addressing key aspects within a discussion of contemporary art, are a continuation from your initial investigations when you started Duende, or have they changed?

Jos: It is a period of time between 1996 until now, and lots of things have changed; mostly in the way we started working, from generating our own platforms. In the beginning, our work was based on and a result of these discussions, nightly parties, hanging out, and discussing how to change our situation as artists.

SRK: You mean, asking questions like, "what is missing, what do we want as artists?"

Liesbeth: Yes. But our work is still very much based on those questions.

Jos: What has changed now, is that once people started asking us to do something outside Rotterdam, we had to consider the place and time we were working in. For example, we were invited to Stockholm, and then we had to work in relation to Stockholm (the Moderna Museet Projekt). And we're not from there—it is a new and strange situation, and we had to formulate a vision, to react to that. So it's a different approach, and one learns from the things you have done in the past.

Liesbeth: The mentality, the things we have developed with Duende and the situation with the politics, creating exhibitions...I see it as useful skills you take with you. For me, and I think this is a central issue, it is that one is not afraid. That one doesn't have an anxiety, insecurity, about approaching things you don't know. For example, the one year we visited P.S. 1 in New York, there was a moment we said, "what are we doing here?" We were in this empty studio, and there was no base like the situation we had here in Rotterdam, a situation that we partly created ourselves. But then, after a few months, we felt we wanted to make the city of New York into our local place; if we were going to live there for one year or longer, then we better make it our city, even if it is big and there is a lot happening. From that urge we created Nomads & Residents (www.nomadsresidents.org), taking advantage of existing situations and energies in New York City, and taking advantage of what that city is: a city in which people are coming and going, constantly. We made a tool out of Nomads & Residents, to connect people, whether for one evening or for just five minutes. Very casual and improvised, but the way we approached this project and set it up, collaborating with others, was born from the same mentality we developed through working with Duende. We aren't currently involved in developing activities with Duende, others do that now, but we continue to do the things we have had a hand in developing, or at least those that are in the context

of our current projects.

SRK: Do you think that the members of, for example Nomads & Residents, which is an international group, share an ideological approach, or is there more a straight connection between the individual artwork of the members?

Jos: The first. There is not necessarily a connection between the artwork the members are doing, it is an ideological issue, an attitude. To start with, there are not only artists in the group, but also curators, filmmakers and architects. Anyone who really and practically is willing to commit can be a part of the organizing group. Nomads & Residents is about exploring the city, to bring people together who potentially share a common interest—to meet, to benefit from the fact that people are coming to the city—to make it public, to reveal the potential creativity of the city exactly because of individuals crossing paths. Nomads & Residents is also mildly critical towards New York City—most of the time artists are coming to the city through commercial galleries or to perform other business. Therefore it is often related to a product, which you can buy or sell—which is the capitalist basis for the system. But there are a lot of things next to this in art, which are important and even might create the under layer, the basis for a certain energy, such as experiments, coincidences, or the exchange of ideas and opinions, even when it is not clear from the start where things might lead to...

Liesbeth: Nomads & Residents is based on meetings, on talking. Talking about what is interesting to you, to someone else. It is comparable to what might happen, what could happen or maybe what should happen in the commercial galleries, where the emphasis is focused and centered on the object itself...

SRK: I know this is a simple statement, but once artwork has made it into the gallery space, it is considered finished, closed. It is now more a discussion of whether you like it, whether it is good, its value, price tag, or whether the price tag reflects its value of meaning. The idea of process becomes mute at that point.

Liesbeth: I am interested in what might be the relation between what you do now, for example in this gallery show, with someone or something outside gallery, someone exhibiting in another show, or someone who has been dead for 30 years! I want to ask, “what is the context of this work, today and what does that mean for what I am thinking or doing?” I am interested in challenging that.

SRK: That is why I asked this question about whether the members of Nomads & Residents had more of an ideologically shared viewpoint, because I think a lot of artists don't want to work within a group of people, because they are afraid their artwork doesn't have anything in relation to another's artwork. I guess I am saying that like-minded practice, in relation to the visual arts, shouldn't be limited to the physical object. The issue is then what it is to be in collaboration—are you working with others towards making objects or can one say you are working towards making connections, manifestations, research? This makes me think back on the initiatives that exist here in Rotterdam, because the artists in each initiative are quite eclectic, and they often have

little or no visual connection between their artwork. Is then collaboration between artists just as valid if it is only an ideological or practical endeavor?

Liesbeth: I think this is difficult to answer. Because, there is no general rule for this or any other way of working. I also don't think it is the case that all the people associated with artist run spaces work together. To take Duende as an example, this is a group of around 40- individually working artists. It is a pragmatic association between individuals, and sometimes, mostly during quite a short but super intense period of time, there is a conjunction of energy, ambition, need, passion, crazy-ness, which might lead to great things...and I think it did, for a while. After that, it was necessary to rethink, restart, in a way, and I think that is normal too, for such a big organization based on studios and activities and guest studios. The guest studios however are very important, and I think you could say exactly that is a very ideological approach, and much needed, in any city, cultural and political climate, always....

Nomads & Residents, I feel is very ideological, and that is not only expressed in its choice of artists and meeting places, but also in its format: it resists heavy organization, we all wanted it to be light, flexible, not attached to any institutional burdens such as administration, money, space, etc. It rides the city as a horse...

In artist run spaces there has to be room for everyone's own interests, otherwise people can't continue to commit and to invest time and energy in keeping it running. For the 40 people in Duende, one of the reasons for its existence is affordable studio space. And any ideological stance or image of Duende comes on top of that, gives it something, and sometimes a lot extra, which is very important. But this "extra" part is always created by the people themselves and completely formed by and dependent on their energy.

Jos: There is also the danger, that when an artist run space becomes an institution, it wants to continue on some same level, consolidate, forever. P.S 1 in New York City used to be a spin-off of a combination of a 1960's mentality and very site-specific urban developments—which lead to squatting. And now it is affiliated with the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It has become an established venue...so there is always a tension between rigid consolidation, stagnation, and free flying possibilities.

Liesbeth: ...and with the squatting esthetics as a decoration.

Jos: As façade...it still looks like a squatted building, and in a way it is holding onto its memory or history. But what is happening inside is a re-presentation of a real art business.

Liesbeth: It is a gallery rooted in ideology.

SRK: You know many people associated with P.S. 1? Are they promoting this association with MoMA, or is it just something they do out of necessity to maintain the space.

Jos: It is a pragmatic, a New York, or furthermore American mentality—you have to survive, so you have to catch your moment. P.S. 1 is very clever in finding these mo-

ments, and the director of P.S. 1 is still the director who has been there from the very beginning. She made it possible.

Liesbeth: It is also about power, about continuation, and that is important. One can be very negative about these kind of dynamics, but at the same time it is important and exciting that something that started in the 1970's as a totally anarchistic artist run space really changed whole SoHo in the beginning, a much cited example of gentrification... and that this space ended up in Queens and developed into what it is now...it has to continue, to make the whole effort worth while...and they have to align themselves with MoMA. It changes, really, and I think this is interesting, that the whole idea of squatting, this mentality of having this 'free zone' is actually constantly capable of re-inventing itself time and time again, in order to develop, to change, to be on the move. That history is still there, and yes, it is a decoration, now used as a romantic emblem. The administration doesn't work as once they did when still a squat. They are not squatters, they are not a free zone.

SRK: It is always at a certain point, or after a certain amount of time, desires will change. Groups often have a lifespan, and like you said earlier, a rhythm, and maybe these group dynamics should be expected to change...

Liesbeth: But it is not only the free zones of artist initiatives, in regards to this rhythm of dynamics shifting—I think it is everywhere: museums, cities. It is an organic thing, which is, I think, inevitable. Somebody, some group, comes into a position within society with a lot of energy, with a lot of spark. When something like this happens, it is really great. People want it to continue and try to add to the situation, with their own energy. It is a desire to maintain something, to help it grow, and the energy needed for this is much different than the energy it takes to start; it is another kind of investment, and sometimes even requires a different type of people. It is bound to happen. But I like these kinds of struggles.

SRK: We need this idea of a common working practice—a place where one puts the 'we' before the 'I', in art. Besides having had the opportunity to work in a few collaborations, I am mostly involved with peoples work ideologically, and involved in the discussion of their work. The two of you are sharing a studio practice, in the widest sense of the term. How does that operate?

Liesbeth: Totally! As Jos said, he initially was making sculptures, and I paintings. Our collaboration was as a critique to our earlier practice. It was about authorship, exoticism and the artist as genius. And it was also about the object as the one thing to strive for—a very modernistic way of looking at art and our critique was on that way of looking, which we felt was a very limited way. The copy of Jos' kitchen in Kitchen Piece was, initially, our answer to the limitations. Our collaboration started really playful, critical but constructive. And it was impossible, after taking this road, for us to go back to the individual way of working, to our former studio practice. Collaboration is more than one and one—if it is good, it is generating more than this—it is a very intense way of working.

SRK: You mean intense to be working together, sharing in this way through collaboration?

Liesbeth: Yes, because the critique (and self-critique) is already, totally involved in the format you setup as a collaborative team. It is not always rational, but it is incorporated in the action because we are, obviously, more than one. Of course, one can have a critique, or inner voice, when working alone. But still, in working alone, you construct inner taboos. With two or three, there is always this kind of dynamic of personal investment and enthusiasm, but also sometimes disappointment, anger and difference of opinions. These things you not only have to negotiate, but also struggle with. Therefore I think, when you work together, like we do, our ideas are carefully thought through but the tempo and the intensity is high.

SRK: Do you find that from working together as a collaboration team, you are more interested in how other artists work together, or what work they do, and this is your biggest interest in looking at art?

Jos: Maybe it becomes more natural that we look at designers and architects, because for them this collaboration aspect is more normal, as in the structure and the idea of a working office. For us, it is becoming more and more normal that we work this way, and I think it is becoming more common that artists work in this way...

Liesbeth: Gilbert and George, Fischli and Weiss...But the art world doesn't like it so much.

Jos: Also, it isn't new. There are many examples from the 50's and 60's, even the 20's, going back to the Dadaists. I think that has more to do with a lack of memory.

SRK: In last few years, are you mostly working with art institutions?

Liesbeth: We are always working through or in an art context. So, even if we do a project in the public space, there is always the art context, whether you want it or not. Lately, we are more involved or invited to situations related to the architectural discourse, but then in a social context—a crossover between actual space and thinking-space, and we are stepping in there with our own knowledge and experience which all comes from our development as an artist.

A good example of our working within an art context is The Bookshop Piece we made for the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum. At the time we realized the piece for the museum, people asked us, "it is a really nice bookshop, but why don't you start a bookshop in Rotterdam?" But that is something else, a different issue, to start a bookshop in Rotterdam. By creating The Bookshop Piece in the Boijmans Van Beuningen and then having it disappear since it was a temporary project, makes the missing of it more tangible. It makes it clear that a good bookshop in a museum is necessary. The missing cannot be dismissed...

SRK: I recently read an article that referenced a French theorist named Jean-Luc Nancy, who had developed a concept of 'commonness', the notion of the 'we' before the 'I', that our relationships to the world are always in relation to other people, even things, and not just to ourselves. How do you feel about that in relation to the last 50 or so years, where the art world has really been focused on the individual? I am of the opinion that it is changing, that the art world is really looking more towards the collaboration within artwork. I can't fully say why this is, but I definitely see examples that the focus is changing.

Liesbeth: I think it is more a rectification on history. Art history and art critique of the last century, was and mostly still is, reaffirming the idea of the individual, the genius—even if there were many collaborative efforts (for example in the case of the avant-garde groups from the 20th Century) of people working together in order to change something with communal effort. Art history however emphasizes on the individual, a genius as the leader of this effort. And this isn't always the case. So all the struggle between these types of artist collaborations has been filtered, stuffed away, in order to create the image, the esthetics almost, of one or two front persons. It isn't true for the Futurists, it isn't true for De Style, and so on. As for the Situationists, they wrote a lot themselves, so it was quite difficult for art historians to change their history, because it was written already, but still, a lot was neglected, not recognized or simply denied. As example, Mondriaan is pictured as a total individual genius, as if he wasn't working with others, or couldn't work with others. It isn't true; he worked with the De Style group, and although they quarreled quite a bit, they quarreled about concepts, content, and he participated in making a magazine with them....and in doing so, history is being changed, manipulated.

I don't think the practice of artists of the 90's is simply a rectification on history. But, people might be starting to realize that the way artists were *supposed* to have worked in the past as individuals is not entirely true. Still, I think the art world likes the individual-genius-object-maker model better.

SRK: How does it work then here, in Rotterdam, because so many artists here are associated with groups, whether ideologically or as a practicing team? This association that individual artists have might not be through a like-minded working practice, or that they follow a manifesto, but being in a stichting is a collaborative effort. I wonder how you think the galleries react to this relationship.

Liesbeth: In the 1990's, there were many examples of artist initiatives in Rotterdam being invited to places like the Kunsthal to create projects and manifestations. Polaris was very active in setting up events with artists' initiatives. And when Arno van Roosmalen was the city curator in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, he worked closely with art initiatives and groups.

But realistically, if a curator wants to make an exhibition they approach the artist, which sometimes might be a team or another working structure, because they like the work. And I also don't think it is a good idea to group all the individuals of an artists initiative together as a sort of single minded entity just for the sake of it.

SRK: I would like to think that there is a new form, a new idea growing, of what it means to work in a group, in contrast to the art groups of the past. It is more of an ideological practice, a mindset, that links artists together—how to join forces with other artists, or institutions if you want, to work towards a certain goal, that might even be abstract, but pushes the art climate around you in certain ways. It isn't about thinking of a new image or style to represent your self within. It is more an organizational structure—to make doors open.

Liesbeth: To make a new thing...I don't think this possibility really exists. What is 'new' anyway?!? The world is getting smaller, and that new thing you thought you were doing is at the same moment happening thousands of kilometers away. Maybe in the past, when communication used to be not as intense as it is today, at least you would not know about it... - end -



Jan Adriaans and Korneel Jeuken, *Helmond New Cholula*, 2000, Helmond



Jan Adriaans, *The Stacking Man Has Never Been Homeless*, 2003

January 23, 2004

Interview with Jan Adriaans

S.R. Kucharski: How often have you worked with other people collaboratively?

Jan Adriaans: I have worked twice with Korneel Jeuken. He studied at the Piet Zwart Institute here in Rotterdam. But I originally know him from my study in Breda. We have made installation-based projects together.

SRK: Was one of those projects the pyramid of cardboard boxes installation? I remember seeing documentation of that project.

Adriaans: Yes, and another project; mainly big, built sculptures. Korneel is a very much a builder. We collaborated in order to make a big gesture in space. It was also with the projects that we would make them in one week. These quite big objects to make within a single week time frame...

SRK: What led the two of you to collaborate?

Adriaans: I had this opportunity to make an exhibition in Helmond, in the Cacao Fabriek (<http://www.cacaofabriek.nl>). Because we were traveling together in Mexico for a few months before this exhibition, I thought, "Why not make something together?" We were having this experience of traveling together, and it was good to do something with this experience. In our traveling situation, we lived very close together, deciding together where to go in Mexico, which route to take, where to stay. We started our collaboration from this experience...

SRK: Was it difficult sometimes to come to any conclusions about working together?

Adriaans: It was very difficult! For me, it is something to do once in a while. The process is interesting because you start to learn and come to ideas that you don't have yourself—as in a certain point of view. Most of the time, you get reactions from people who see and watch your work, afterwards, after the making. In collaboration projects, everything you want to do, or when you make a change, becomes a discussion during the process! Things you normally do in your head, you now have to speak out!

SRK: One has to be precise and verbal about ideas during the collaboration, something you don't always have to elucidate to yourself when making artworks.

Adriaans: Yeah, you learn how to define your steps when collaborating. Every step you make, you must discuss with the other person. You get really aware of why you're making the work, or collaborating. And most of the time when I am working alone, I am not really aware of the why...

SRK: The first project you collaborated with Korneel was the project, or the sculpture,

made from cardboard boxes in the form of a pyramid. Can you describe that piece?

Adriaans: First, Korneel and I were thinking of what to do with this place, Helmond. Helmond isn't really a great place in the Brabant area of the Netherlands. It is not a popular city. While in Mexico, Korneel and I went to all these beautiful and historic sites, which are sometimes very touristic. However, one feels the history and importance of the place—at the same time, you see all these t-shirt salesmen, souvenir and backpackers from around the World. To develop an idea for the project in Helmond was kind of an extra job for us while traveling. The traveling was first, but there was something for us to think about in the background. Suddenly, I said to Korneel, “Why don't we make a pyramid?” We had seen lots of them, of course, in Mexico. We wanted to give Helmond a sort of statue, something they could be proud about. It was at first an idea, to give this city of Helmond, where nothing much is happening, their own monument, made from the same materials that are produced from the industry there, from factories that are making cardboard.

SRK: Seems like you developed a very clear thought of what to produce for Helmond while traveling and being influenced by what you saw in Mexico!

Adriaans: Yes, by the end it was quite clear what we wanted to do. Sometimes you find in Holland cities where they have gotten rid of all historical heritage—the old factories, city centers, etc. Afterwards the cities are looking for an original feeling of the city that has vanished, and this was applicable to Helmond. Many cities replace the old with these huge new buildings with many styles to them, and it doesn't make sense, because they are built very quickly under a thought or copy of some style, and most often from some architect from outside Holland. The new architecture has no direct relationship to the place, like for example, to be in Helmond.

SRK: It is interesting how the pyramid piece relates to this idea of a cities' erased history—that things like old factory buildings or leftover architecture end up defining a city or a period of time in which a city was founded and came “alive” based on a sort of industry. Although many cities continue to thrive after the older industry has left, this older industry leaves a physical, visual landmark that continues to inform people's relationship to their town. Now we are talking about cultural history...

Adriaans: With Helmond, they were looking for something beautiful again, some sort of identity...

SRK: Did the people from Helmond who came to the exhibit understand the project in relation to the references about history, monumental landmarks, etc.?

Adriaans: Well, it is difficult to say. We made these t-shirts, and on the shirt was an image of a pyramid, and written under that was the word Helmond. People saw our t-shirts, and they had this reaction of, why a t-shirt with this sculpture, for this city?!? It has to do with the attitude of the people of course. I do think the people saw the humor in it.

SRK: You are really asking people to make some sort of leap, to find the humor in this relationship between the work and the city. You are asking people to jump on some conceptual bandwagon and say, “This is our pyramid...from Helmond!” In reality of course, it is the symbol for an idea about Helmond....

Adriaans: We had become very aware, in Mexico, about ideas of originality and history, coming from the Native Indians and from the Spanish settlers. There, you really feel the urge of society to promote the buildings that reflect their culture. There is a tourist side to it of course, but much more giving pride to the people. It was quite weird to figure out a relationship between Mexico and the situation in Helmond. Because Korneel and I were both born in the neighborhood of Helmond, in Brabant, it made us also aware of where we had come from—it is not in our nature to be proud of where we come from.

SRK: You mentioned that Korneel is more an object builder, and I know you have worked mainly as a photographer and video maker. Do you think that your photography and video work has a visual relationship to the work you have developed with Korneel? Conversely, does Korneel’s sculptures look like or reference the collaborative pieces?

Adriaans: In some way they do. When working together you try to meld your different ideas into one. But also you try to exploit the different approaches. I am very interested in how domestic objects are made, or how things come together, are built. I am interested in how things are made through limitations, like poverty. Korneel, as a sculptor and draftsman, is making basic well-made objects, which give the impression of houses, or floors. I would say a “basal” way of transforming architecture. He is also experimenting with materials—combining very new materials with very old materials. Korneel’s work is very sculptural, very monumental. In a way, I am also photographing in a sculptural way. When I make a photo, I want to make things bigger, or look smaller, rounder or flatter.

SRK: In relation to how we perceive them in reality?

Adriaans: Yes. It is definitely a sculptural way of looking at subjects.

SRK: It sounds like you are thinking on the way we think things are built...which is interesting because photography is not usually understood through sculptural definitions. I agree that photography can confuse you about the nature of how things are built—if you are good at photography, good at manipulating the visual image, you can manipulate what people think exists in reality. Because the physicality of a photograph is, or maybe once was, considered a proof of reality, photography can often make one question the difference between how you see a real object, and how photography manipulates you to see this same object.

Adriaans: It is not in an artificial way, that I make my photographs. I don’t use a computer or anything like that. I limit myself to points of view, to using light. I often use normal light, without flash... I envy people that are handy—I am not handy at all—but

I like to make stuff, and it is something I struggle with. Maybe you can see that in my photography as well, as a subject matter. Photography is a way to investigate, as well—it is a way to investigate the surroundings in which you are living. Photography is a way to be critical, and with admiration at the same time. It is the actual experience of making a photo that I want to intensify in my work.

SRK: I was reading an article from the Tate Magazine from England, and there was an essay in that magazine that read, and I am paraphrasing here, that the writer appreciated the art gallery setting because it was the last place that one could actually articulate a critique. The gallery has become a structure, where something that is placed in it is specifically there for us to actively think about, relate to it. We are not necessarily there to live with it, it is not something that we have to do, it is not something the government told us to do, it is not part of our societies' rules and regulations, it is not some moral religious dogma. Something, an object in the widest sense of the term, is placed in front of us to react upon. I thought a lot about this statement, and I am quite happy with it. It is very interesting to me, after hearing so much complaining about needing to bust out of the white cube structure of viewing art, which in itself is a quite old complaint. I am excited about this desire to be critical, also. The idea that the gallery, for a moment, separates you from the World, creates for you a little bubble, where one can think about whatever has been presented to you, as a viewer, by the artist.

Adriaans: I think it is very important that one takes notice of the space, and considers the reasons for using a gallery. A gallery is specific, not every gallery is an artist-run space, nor vice versa, for example. So sometimes, you have to take notice of what type of gallery it is, what position it has, whether it is a dull gallery, a hip gallery, etc. All these things have an influence on one's work—how people see your work. It is also important how you place it—if your work takes over the space, or it is drowning in the space. As an artist, you must be aware of all these kinds of things. And for yourself, you have to decide where to show your work—to be aware of possibilities. But still, it is nice to move around in different circuits. And, to a certain extent, one is not in control of this “position.”

SRK: You mean artist run space circuits, high-end gallery circuits, etc.? I know that in every country I have had the opportunity to get to know, there are always different levels or circuits in which the art world manifests. There are, of course, the different levels of art gallery, museum, artist run space. And then there are different levels of economy in art—spaces that just show art, spaces that just sell art. They are different circuits, but they all tie into each other.

Adriaans: The great thing is, as an artist, you don't have to give a fuck about all these circuits—just do it, make art, everywhere you want to! You don't have to worry about showing in a gallery, or an arts initiative—just do your thing as well, and with some attitude! Hopefully, something that gives you a lot of freedom. It is important to not get stuck to one thing. It makes you very much aware of yourself and your work, when you know how, why and where you place yourself. The only thing that really matters is where you stand, what you want to show, and what work is the best for the situation.

SRK: It is nice that you brought up the word “attitude,” because I wonder how that plays into the sense of “who you are as an artist,” or how it plays into the sense of one’s work—how to carry an attitude, a basic attitude. One of the themes I wanted to address in these interviews was the loose definition of the new art, what is avant-garde, or whether that label is applicable—whether there is any attitude, avant-garde attitude, that exists anymore. And what would that mean, if we could make a guess? Is an avant-garde attitude meaning “going against” what is upheld or promoted as acceptable art, official art? Also, against academicism. Hmm, would that imply then that artist-run spaces, or do-it-yourself spaces, would always be slightly “avant garde,” because they would be a little outside of the mainstream system? In reality, I can’t say one way or the other that artist-run spaces show better work than mainstream galleries... .

Adriaans: Work looks smoother in a mainstream gallery setting.

SRK: Yeah ok, maybe in a mainstream gallery, the work often looks more “professional,” we could say, but professional has nothing to do with being avant-garde...

Adriaans: Or anything to do with quality! Ok, what is also academic?!? In the academies here, you aren’t learning very much technique, it is very free and open, so one can’t say, “This looks academic.” So, the strict separation between art that is accepted, academicism, avant-garde—it is very difficult to make. Chaos rules, I would say. That is a good thing, but it is difficult then to be against something, to make your own rules and dogmas in relation the other. It is a more confusing time for avant-garde thinking, because it isn’t really fitting as opposite to something else anymore. For me, it is an old-fashioned term—it brings back memories from the 1970s or 1980s. I think people are most influenced by a mixture of everything. I am influenced by a complete mixture of things. One could say people are doing things a safe way or a radical way. And I think that is a more interesting set of words to use. This is what I mean about attitude—to have some guts. Don’t get locked into a style, in order to sell work.

SRK: Historically speaking, if you look at artists that we learn about and study in school, you find a lot of artists that approach a way of working because it was their attitude, a part of their belief, like you talk about, to make imagery that visually represents a way of thinking. Let’s think about Giorgio Morandi, just off the top of my head, who painted still life works for years, and lived a hermetic life that is really represented in the feeling of his paintings! His way of living—his attitude in life—are his attitudes in his paintings. I can think of artists like Sol LeWitt, who had such a theoretical attitude about art making, who ended up designing these complex geometrical paintings that you can make in space and spaces, and that work is about an attitude of working. My point is: these ways of working, from these two artists, really just stick there, in their style. These artists have their view on the World—they go their whole life, 60 years or so, and just keep this attitude up. I wonder how that plays into this idea you just said: don’t fall into something you recognize as good and make money from it, and furthermore have guts, take risks, do what you want to do even if it radically different from what you did the year before....

Adriaans: Yeah, well, I could think about this for some time! I know there are artists that go deeper and deeper into form, but then, they find a challenge within this very small framework, and it is quite clear for them, I think. It's also something for me to figure out. I'm still very quickly seduced to work with different media or subjects.

SRK: Maybe we can talk about it in way of calling it a quest? And with that word, you have a quest of trying to figure something out. And maybe, you are one of the lucky or few who finds an audience for your artwork, and maybe you become a self-supported and possibly well known artist. Yet, you are still questing, for yourself...

Adriaans: Yes, maybe you aren't finished after making just one, and you try over and over to make it stronger.

SRK: That is something to say, that every time you start a new piece on an old subject, your investigation delves deeper into a dialogue with the subject or the medium.

Adriaans: I think that if you feel the urge to make something, it is ok to do that. And if it is, like you say, a quest then one should see it in the work—that defines if the work still has a certain quality, and if there is a need to still produce it. Maybe that defines the very good from the less good in art.

SRK: I am always asking artists what they think is new, avant-garde, or so on. I do it out of curiosity, but I must be honest, I also have my own agenda here: I am often surprised by how what we consider “new” in art is actually a re-use of history, art from art history, and without the knowledge of history behind you, an artist can think that it is a new thought, new image, so on and so forth. Besides the interest in this hidden truth behind the “new,” I am also trying to put together a clear idea of why artists, or maybe not artists but the art world, puts so much attention to the new, and whether, in general, if artists had a much better understanding of history and theory, we could overturn this desire for the new and start to develop a new understanding of continuous history....

Adriaans: Well, come on, we are not from Mars! Of course we artists are influenced by history. Maybe now the road for art is not to “be new,” because now it gets into an idea of competition with all the other forms of media. And, art already has a different position in society, historically speaking. What people think as new are computer animations, how fast things can go, how real it looks—everything that has to do with the technique of things. I think the goal of artists, or the need for artists, is that they are able to make, and to figure out, statements/images without having a direct goal. Of course, they have a goal for themselves. I think it is very important for artists, that they should have no intentions to make a lot of money, no intentions to make a ‘hit’—just scratch the surface of things, use ideas as tools, make art your own like your own handwriting is. I know this is a romantic way of looking at artists, but the artist is a romantic profession. Art has nothing to do with the speed of advertisement, it has to do with one's own speed. And, this is the nice thing about artists: they can be serious and light hearted at the same time, twist the perspective of things—use a computer as a hammer, for example!

SRK: ...Or the way one grabs disparate things, composes parts from all different parts of life, society, etc... .

Adriaans: No, it just means placing oneself in the world, and not in an arrogant way. All artists are trying to make an image, and defining everything to one's own standards, one's own way of thinking. That is why I think it is still important to have artists working beside society, and that they have a look upon society from this position outside it or beside it, and have a twist, a freaky mind. I think this will always be important for me. It is actually a main reason to still make artwork, for me. I can understand that people are into one thing, and just follow a path...actually, I find that weird, really weird. For me, I am distracted by many things; seduced by many things. By very common things, and strange, weird things. I like being seduced by things. It is a way of letting the world affect you, and it defines your own perception of the world, your own desires.

SRK: There are also groups of artists organizing themselves together, although it isn't always related to their own individual work. I am starting to think more and more, that this action, or working together ideologically, is the most relevant and inspiring path—essentially, denying the artist individual, artist as genius template. One thing I am not saying is, everyone throw down your paint brushes and start collaborating! I am talking here about an ideological, or as you say it, an attitude in working.

Adriaans: It is also a way to simply get your foot in the door, to inform yourself, to find a good place to show your work. It is a way to solve many practical issues. All the time, one has to deal with practical problems, like waiting to be invited for an exhibition—it is good to turn this around... .

SRK: Well, only if you are aware enough of how you want your work to be seen and you know how to fit yourself into it.

Adriaans: The big difference in all this do-it-yourself ideas versus trying-to-get-a-show-in-a-museum ideas is you have a *choice* about it with DIY. You can't control everything, however. I think this the interesting thing about Rotterdam, is that there is all this ability to get involved in events with other artists. It is an interesting place, with all the artists here...it's very alive.

SRK: I think it is unique that there are so many artist initiatives based here in Rotterdam: Stichting B.a.d., Duende, Het Wilde Weten, Cucosa. All the groups organized around buildings, practical solutions to studio space. More or less, they are working together, with an attitude that something needs to be done in order to work as an artist in Rotterdam. Exposure, relevance, existence—these are the words that come to mind when I think about the artist initiatives here in Rotterdam.

Adriaans: Yes, I think they embody a strong idealism as well. These organizations are in many ways providing opportunities for artists, and I don't know how many people realize that—in the way they invite guests or offer studio space or residencies.

SRK: In the States, there are residencies, but they are usually of two types: very expensive, short-term stays, or free, high-end residencies that border on being more like an award, and are often given only to artists who are well known in local or national circles. Therefore, the best residencies are so utterly competitive it makes one sick. There are almost no examples in the States of artist-run initiatives like exist here in Rotterdam.

Adriaans: But not only in Rotterdam—there are a lot of artist-run initiatives all over the Netherlands. These groups are often very nice, you can stay over, they give you a good feeling about being there, making artwork for their institution or whatever. It is quite nice to have this space to work, figure things out in your process, during a residency. And maybe that is also the difference between Dutch art and foreign art: foreign art is often more direct, more finished. Dutch art is more about a process, about what can happen after, what happened before, or what state it is in now.

SRK: Do you really think it has something to do with the artwork?

Adriaans: I am talking about climate, really. In Holland, you are not really forced to make something that is there to sell, that your only option to show your work is to place it in a gallery and have it be for sale. Of course, this is an advantage we have, to give oneself time to be in the process of art making; to make artwork that is in touch with a way of working. But at the same time, it doesn't force one to make any real strong statement, which of course could end up being superficial statements in the end. But their really isn't any force or demand on the Dutch artist to make a statement. I think it has something to do with time to work, to be without big deadlines.

SRK: Do you think the system of subsidies, the system of accepting the artist as “just who they are,” the Dutch artist doesn't have to prove him/herself in a critical climate?

Adriaans: Well, the subsidy commissions make the critical climate, and at the moment it's silent. At the same time, artists are not really accepted as contributing to society—they are seen as welfare people. We don't have the stature or standing, in comparison to say, an artist in Germany. It is like, “Oh yeah, they are an artist, they're a bit weird, but let them do their stuff...and if it isn't going to cost too much money, then ok...”

SRK: That is such a bizarre attitude! But then, the attitude that I grew up with, which is different than how I see the state of things now, is that in the States, if you were going to be an artist, you were going to be poor your whole life, and you most likely couldn't do anything else but be an artist. Unless, of course, you became a famous artist in time, and then you became culture, you were put on a big pedestal. You have informed upon culture, and then you are respected. Thankfully, now, I think this is attitude about artists is disappearing. However, it isn't as if people are going around saying, “Yeah, wow, painting and drawing is really important!” Now, people in the States are starting to see culture as something that gets manipulated by the arts; how the visual arts, for example, can crossover into all other fields...

Adriaans: Artists are in a position to be critical, without being prosecuted, or censored...yet. We have responsibility to use this platform we are standing on.

SRK: Although, one could say visual art is just trying to make itself valid in relation to pop culture: films, music, fashion.

Adriaan: Art shouldn't have to compete with film, or a discotheque, or a concert! Museums once provided a free entrance, and that gave a person a whole other perspective when viewing art, versus viewing a concert or film. Art should have a position that everyone can view it. But now, it gets more competitive in regards to price.

SRK: I now am starting to wonder what happens, in general, now that museums might have to compete for attention against films and concerts. What is the next step to take?

Adriaans: There is a totally different intention in these two things.

SRK: That gives me an impression that art exists under the idea that it is something one is supposed to find, or let it find you, whereas a movie or concert is something one seeks out—you are prepared to pay—the concert or movie is somehow guaranteed to be worth your money. In going to a gallery, it is free. With a museum, now there is an idea that you will pay your money, and what you see inside will be worth your money. It puts a strange and different standard on viewing art than before. What do you charge the audience, in relation to the value of the exhibition?

Adriaans: But then, it is about the money—museums are a business, no? - end -

Let's meet
somewhere
innbetween

<http://www.why-rotterdam.tk>

February 15th, 2004

Interview with Innbetween

SRK: In regard to your collaboration, when did you start to work together? What were the reasons that brought you together, and furthermore, brought you to Rotterdam?

Peter: It starts in Vienna. It was in 2000 that we both started working together in a new media company, freelance, under the job title "Conceptionists."

Christine: Peter was there longer than I. I wanted to find out after art school... to one time have a look at the economy, to really research how money is related to creative skills.

SRK: You mean art, as a skill, for a job?

Christine: Yes, I didn't want to be prejudiced and just think, "Oh, everything is bad when it has to do with money or industry." After about five years working independently as an interdisciplinary artist, I wanted to know how this world works, because one can only find out about it when you are in it. Basically, the job we had at the new media company didn't exist—we sort of invented our jobs!

Peter: The place was called Nofrontiere (<http://www.nofrontiere.com>), which was a new media agency with a couple of architects of which I was one of them. Under the name "mediatecture," we made installations and received a lot of projects for museums and exhibitions. It was about how graphic designers, programmers and architects work together. The particular project in which Christine and I started working together was a concept for "Mozart 2006."

Christine: It was a project for Salzburg to conceptualize what can happen in that city for a festival.

Peter: ...And, to celebrate Mozart's 250th birthday. The nature of these projects we worked on was to look at cities, in this case Salzburg, and think, "How can we translate this story, how can we dramatize the story of Mozart for people to experience it in different ways or an interesting way in the city?" It was public space installations we proposed which at the time was also six years in advance so we proposed many ideas with "to-date unknown materials." The project was very conceptual and we didn't know what could happen between then and 2006.

Christine: This company also produced commercial web sites, like bank web sites. On the side of this, they produced these so-called "cultural projects," which was for them experimental. But they weren't. They were about drawing in money, about "infotainment" or the mediation of culture.

SRK: The two of you were placed in charge of the cultural projects for this firm?

Peter: Yes, and in this company of 50 people, at that time, these projects were considered the privileged projects, the interesting ones. But, like Christine said, they were cultural-commercial projects. The short story is we did three or four of these projects and with each, there was a growing from experience.

Christine: While working within these projects, Peter and I talked more and more in private about the context in which we worked. Because I had been ten years in Vienna, and both of us were strung out from the work with this company, we decided that we should go somewhere, to find a new context which wasn't so familiar to us—to find a city that we didn't know so much about. Rotterdam seemed interesting—we had heard a little bit about the architecture in the city, but we didn't really believe that there was such “cool architecture” here. We weren't believers in a cliché sort of way.

SRK: This collaboration between the two of you started at this company, but do you think this company shaped your ideas to further work together?

Peter: I think we probably began our collaboration because of the context, both with our interests in the new media world...

Christine: ...But, we wanted to go farther, to experiment more.

Peter: It also had to do with our own personal developments—it definitely was an intersection point of our two lives. With regards to our own practice, this company was where we met each other and found that we had a lot in common. But we often said, “Hey, we have lots of ideas after five o'clock, which are far more interesting, with much less bureaucracy and commerce involved—wouldn't it be much better to work on those ideas?!” It was the summer of 2001, when I returned to Canada briefly and Christine remained in Austria, that we felt we needed to be somewhere else, to do something different. So let's meet somewhere in-between. We initially thought about Amsterdam because, well, it was a middle point between Austria and Canada. OK, there were also all these clichés of freedom, liberal thinking, etc., etc.

Christine: The story of us leaving for Holland is quite funny—my Mom has a small car, and we packed everything we had, which is about a third of what you see here in this room and we traveled to Amsterdam to a place where we had booked five days in a pension. That was all that we knew for certain about our future here...

SRK: When I first met you, in the fall of 2002, you were trying to develop a magazine. Is that a project you developed in Holland, or was it a project you brought with you?

Christine: I would say both. We each already had an interest in writing and playing with images and text in different ways. But, I would also say that Rotterdam really triggered it. When we arrived here in Rotterdam in the Fall of 2001, it was just before September 11th and we saw so much changing around us—a roller coaster of information and changes in society. We immediately thought, “Fuck this, there is no medium that describes these changes from the other side.” A lot of cities have that, some magazine

where critical views are reflected in print. We really thought that was missing here in Rotterdam. We also saw a gap in the linking of artists and socially, politically engaged people. There was no public platform of exchange.

Peter: We wanted (and still want) to make a monthly or bi-monthly city journal: “WHY-Rotterdam.” Why we are still here is because we find Rotterdam an incredibly interesting city, but for other reasons than how Rotterdam communicates itself. In connection with the way of working in Vienna, we knew how to research and go into different corners. In order to get the story together, in an investigative, journalistic and artistic way, one collects a pile of information from different sources and processes it. How the city of Rotterdam currently describes itself is very superficial.

Christine: We also wanted to insert a bit of mythology, what we sensed when we first arrived. Like when we entered the city for the first time it was dark, the wind was blowing and it was raining. In the West, there are all these weird houses, and then there is the skyline with all these skyscrapers—it looked like a comic book scenario, some dark kind of comic...

Peter: Yes, some dark kind of comic about multiple realities, secret societies and underground locations that no one knows about. Rotterdam is the perfect stage set for that and no one was playing with it.

One of our strongest perceptions of Rotterdam was how you can feel the city government. Initially we were very interested in the dS+V (<http://www.dsv.rotterdam.nl>), in the city planning. This city is under constant reconstruction. There is the “master planning” of everything, the ordering of the environment. That is Rotterdam. We were very struck by that.

Christine: Yes, and you also have the “free spaces” like the Poortgebouw (<http://www.poortgebouw.nl>), we find them in strong contrast to the city. You often see in Rotterdam how buildings and things are being flattened out in order for something new. We thought there must be some way to profit from the “in-between stages”, so to say, the transition from the old to the new. We wondered what the city government is doing with that element. Are they supporting it? Or, are they more of the feeling to fix it up?!? We see that they want to fix up the city more than support the in-between stage. WORM (<http://www.wormweb.nl>) is a good example of this. It was our first anchor here in Rotterdam—Rochussenstraat was just around the corner from where we first lived.

SRK: I know there are a few things you programmed through WORM. Was it at all important for you to align yourself with a group that was maybe doing things that are close in style to your own artistic practice?

Christine: It is hard to say...we were for example participating in an event loosely described as “culture jamming”—a word they WORM wanted to identify with. WORM is also doing very few “own” productions—they mostly host experimental sound or visual events, very interesting ones, though. There is less room to propose an own program.

It was like that when we arrived and I think it is still like that a bit. I think they should consider it more. Therefore, it was not really possible to say, “let’s organize an evening like this or like that.” Nevertheless, the people of WORM are quite interesting as individuals in what they do and what they have done in the past.

Peter: I don’t think we really “aligned” ourselves with anybody in the way that we currently do now with the Poortgebouw. I think we had a number of gravitation points, which included Marconiplein, Witte de With Straat, WORM, a Turkish family, and otherwise just walking around the city. We were collecting a lot of different experiences. We were initially trying to develop projects, which included this city magazine idea, but we were very autonomous with our ideas. One of our first projects was a proposal for an installation to the city government.

Christine: I think we are the first ones, as artists, to walk into the Marconi Towers, and say, “We want to do something here, with you.” Our first proposal was to do something on the Lloyd Pier, close to where Now&Wow used to be. We found it had a very good atmosphere and a rich history—a lot of emigrants left from there and the place had a lot of traces from that. It was a terminal, and we liked that as a metaphor. We wanted to make that our Inn Between. That is where the name comes from—as a physical meeting point, a place in metamorphosis. We were suspicious that this place would be redeveloped and “white-washed”—that only a certain group of people could move into the new housing being developed, mainly because of price. Because we know already it can get deadened out when you insert something new, without keeping something from the past.

SRK: So you are really talking about installing yourselves into the development of this zone/pier? To involve yourself physically and conceptually within the project, to just be there...

Peter: Yes, within the construction site process, which would go on for ten years. Not that we would also be there for ten years. It is a huge construction site and there are always many different things happening at once in such a project. In that context we wanted to install a place where many different characters intersect, not just architects and city planners but also, how about a WORM performance to take place on the building site, or some sort of cultural program that could happen within the context of the building site.

Christine: We wanted to celebrate this stage of transition, let’s say, before everything is fixed and clean—to be a bit of an expositor! We were interested in a remote connection of and to things. Isn’t that what the government wants anyway, for the building site and the project to become more a part of the city center? And through that, we also thought, “Wouldn’t it be nice to have guest programs from groups that are already in the city?” But...the officials involved with the building site thought we were crazy! (big laugh...)

Peter: Well...it didn’t work out (more laughs...). We learned so much from doing this.

The head project manager was one of the last people we ended up talking to before we stopped pushing with our ideas. This project manager, Henk Smelt, after an hour of us there in his office with the Powerbook and a slide show of our vision and a concept book about what we wanted to do, he basically didn't understand what he should do! He had no idea of how to deal with us! And then he said, "Oh shit, it's five o'clock and I have to go!"

Christine: Yes, the cleaning woman came in already! (laughs...) But, we were quite proud we made it to meet the project manager and that it ended that way. Because I don't think so many artists have done that. If you look at other projects about re-using space in transition, they are more like the parasite city in Utrecht (<http://www.parasiteparadise.nl>), which is through some official contract.

SRK: It is related to how and when a city realizes it needs a "cultural facilitator," or something to that end, to boost its image.

Peter: Or, for a gentrification project! It took us a while to figure out that it is a Dutch trend for the government to offer a lot of money to artists who are willing to go into the "probleem wijken" (urban "problem districts") and decorate them and make them better for a little while before they tear them down. I think that is distinctly different than going to the government with an original idea, which they haven't already had the idea to commission.

Christine: Because art in the public space all happens differently—this is what Siebe Thissen said—that it is commissioned from the top down, and not that artists ask or say, "Hey, we can do something here!" I think one is expected to go to the art institutions and not straight to the government with your proposals.

SRK: Like how in Holland the government is trying to take artists and place them in a role to play a part in culturally manifesting an idea? Like when a city is redeveloping, they think an artist or an architect is needed to produce something that is not straightforward building or street development?

Christine: But it is mostly too late by then. A lot of artists are already saying they are only being invited after too many important decisions have already been made. [See commentary in publication "Ruimte Bezetten," Rotterdam 2001.]

Peter: Like the "one percent" that is leftover, for example, from a building site—then you call the artist to make a nice masturbation, be it a sculpture, or like how many public art projects turn out in Rotterdam. Some sort of object.

SRK: Do you think this is generally lacking in city planning, not taking into account the role of artists, a cultural or artistic aspect, can play from stage one of the development?

Christine: Well, take for example the group Archigram (<http://www.archigram.net/>). What we like so much about them is that they proposed not just a decoration to the es-

tablished ways of living and working, rather, they actually introduced ideas for another way of living. They said living and working isn't always in a 9-to-5 working-day pattern. There are different concepts of living and working. But you find most architects are designing for the car, the family—designing a floor plan to support this specific model. I would say an artist will question more what functions a building could have...

Peter: Or new ways of using spaces. Artists, historically, have had weird ways of living and working—mixed situations.

SRK: So how do these ideas on space, living and working come into play here at the Poortgebouw?

Christine: Well, the Poortgebouw is a good example. The Poortgebouw is an office building from the 19th Century, and you can see how outside it seems like a normal 19th Century building, but how we deal with it inside is different. The re-use of existing space, which is a lot like how other squatted buildings are like.

SRK: What have you done here at the Poortgebouw in order to manifest that idea?

Christine: Physically, we didn't change so much, let's say, as in changing walls. It is just the fact that your personal door isn't the front door—that your public and private space are, if you want, closer together. But, when you want, you can have more privacy. It is more related to how you live together with people. It is also quite easy to organize things, especially when your co-organizer lives just one floor underneath. Also a benefit is the public spaces and facilities that we can use, like the attic and the bar, to make programs.

SRK: What programs have you organized here then? Maybe you can describe what you have organized for the Attic space or what performances you have brought to the podium...

Peter: I just want to say something first about the earlier question, that it was always important to us, when we first got a place to live in Rotterdam, that we would be living and working in the same place. We didn't come to Rotterdam thinking that we would have a studio or a job place and then another place which to call home. We were looking for a place where we could live and work together. That is why the Poortgebouw was attractive to us. Also it is important to say that as foreigners, being Austrian and Canadian in a rather strict and expensive Dutch housing market (especially without subsidies that make rents cost only 200 Euros and we weren't independently rich), we needed an affordable place where ideally we could "do our stuff." Here we have these public spaces inside the building to utilize.

Christine: It is not only cheap living. I like the notion that we do something for the place we live in—a house that you can actually do something for it, and not just be using it. The Poortgebouw also means something in the sub-cultural dimension of Rotterdam. It is a nice feeling that we contribute something to the Poortgebouw while

living in it.

Peter: It is a symbiosis.

Christine: It is not only saying, “Oh, how nice and cheap,” it is a lot of work—over half of our time these days goes to the Poortgebouw.

Peter: It is also important to say that the Vereniging Poortgebouw is not an organization that receives subsidies or any form of structural funding like WORM or a “podium.” In essence, we are a living group and the activities that come out of that dynamic, with us or anyone else who lives here, it is a product of this living group. I think it is important to say this about the Poortgebouw, that it isn’t confused with having a support structure usually assumed with cultural spaces.

SRK: So all the projects done here at the Poortgebouw are autonomous and self-generated—it isn’t a situation where the members of the Poortgebouw are saying, “Ok, we have all this grant money, let’s make something happen!”

Christine: That is, of course, also the problem with it. When you don’t earn anything and you want to make something fundamentally that will survive, it demands time and energy. Therefore, how can you live? One is often in a fatal situation, like we are at the moment, and not everyone can deal with that. One might think it is great and spontaneous what we do, but the financial situation is often such a great concern. Why should people who initiate autonomous cultural programs not get paid? It is very valuable work.

SRK: Yes, what is the personal barter for this kind of effort? It isn’t like you are asking to make loads of money, but anyone and everyone desires to be self-sustainable. When one has to constantly look outside of these autonomous projects for money in order to buy food and pay rent, it is very distracting.

Christine: Yes. One example is that we have a person here at the Poortgebouw who works at Off_Corso as a sound engineer. We also think, shit, he is also standing downstairs at our stage at night getting his ears wrecked being the Poortgebouw sound engineer. Why can’t he be getting paid at least six euros an hour or so from us? We need this kind of skill here for the Poortgebouw programs, and it just so happens he is just a nice guy and gives his time for free. Of course, the question remains how can we pay him, or ourselves? It is a dilemma.

SRK: The two of you started to organize “Theatic” nights, mostly at the Poortgebouw, which can be anything from music to performances to jams. Or, is that something you jumped into doing with other people from the Poortgebouw?

Peter: Theatic, as much as you can say it is a project, was inspired by the Poortgebouw. It was inspired by what we saw in the Poortgebouw. Theatic is basically taking the normal Eetcafe, which happens twice a week, and bringing it upstairs to this great attic

space. We didn't want to give a definition of what kind of evening it was. OK, you have good food and the people and we wanted to add an open podium, to make it a place for experiments in music and film or for somebody who wants to try out some songs. We wanted to provide the infrastructure for other people inside and outside the Poortgebouw to participate. Our role was varied, everything from carrying chairs from around the building to contacting artists and inviting them to perform. What happened here so far has been a real mixed bag. We did it seven or eight times since December of 2002. We are also motivated by the political situation since 2002: the elections, the Pim Fortuyn incident, the ultra right government that people rarely talk about, and how that relates to the Poortgebouw. The Poortgebouw has a history for being a place for political debates, discussions and alternative views on society. We find it very important that more public debates somehow happen here. For example, our recent project "Civic TV." We have worked in collaboration with other people, like the Erasmus University. We also participated at the Open Squat Day and worked with Rotterdam Marketing to open the building to the public and let other people into the house to see what goes on here. Everyone needs places to share ideas...but when you are forced to keep this feeling to yourself, there is less you can do with it over time. It is nice to be able to meet new people and maybe collaborate with them. But it has to have a physical place somewhere...

SRK: Do you want to describe more in detail the Civic TV project, and possibly also your web site, which seems to be holding a lot of information on this political-social debate you're talking about?

Christine: The Civic TV project was motivated out of despair—we were saying to ourselves, "There needs to be a platform for people to speak out, outside of their own work, on what they are thinking and doing." We were thinking that many people have or must have alternative thoughts on how to use Rotterdam as a city. We did want to see Civic TV as a political standpoint or platform, but as it turned out, there wasn't so much politics as a topic during the event. The event of Civic TV wasn't as critical as we wanted it to be. However, we learned a lot from doing it, it is fair to say. The intention was to make punctuations around what is considered normal or how-stuff-should-work. We wanted to bring more people together who had ideas to do things differently in the city. For example, we invited people from the Autonomo Centrum (<http://www.autonomocentrum.nl>) and the Slaakhuys, people who actually practice an alternative to what seems the only prescription for living in this city.

SRK: How did Civic TV function then, was it a series of performances or lectures, and how did you provide for the public to see it and furthermore participate?

Peter: It was publicly advertised, anyone could come, and we had an open door. For the most part it was presentations, which was a bit of the disappointment because the event then fell into the traditional, architect-stereotype presentation forum. There were predominantly people from the world of architecture attending. There was less practicing artists than we hoped. We invited the Hondenkoekjesfabriek (<http://www.angelfire.com/stars3/fcknbstrds/de-HONDENKOEKJESFABRIEK.html>), "the Dog Biscuit Factory," from near Zwolle. I must say they were really the best participants in

Civic TV. They are really passionate people who came two days before the event and setup this amazing installation consisting of security cameras wired all around the building, noise making objects and a performance space installation in the top floor darkroom where video cameras transmitted to monitors a weird scenario which was happening inside the room.

Christine: Their piece had everything to do with surveillance, but they had told us they didn't want to talk about surveillance, they wanted to show it, so people who were there for the event could feel it! They were the only group who wanted to express their ideas through something other than a presentation— it was a disturbance that they created. They really intervened.

SRK: And that was the attitude you wanted Civic TV to have, something that disturbed and intervened with peoples expectations?

Christine: Yes, to challenge the people. We want to do another Civic TV event, and if we can find the opportunity to do it, we want to push farther into that aspect of disturbance—something beyond a monologue situation. This is also something one has to learn; we never made an event like this before with so many participants. We want to address more the idea of a process instead of having people explain what they did in the past, you sit there and clap, and then, “Next one please!” We didn't expect that it would be that way, in the form of presentations. So, we have learned.

SRK: And does the web site you produce then follow up on this attitude that you sought for Civic TV?

Peter: Definitely.

Christine: I think it is a collage of impressions, not only of us but also from other people's submissions.

Peter: The WHY web site (<http://www.why-rotterdam.tk>) has a lot to do with the magazine we originally were proposing to make for Rotterdam. Let's say it started a bit with being an online reflection of the magazine, the best place to test out ideas before we had a print version which would cost a lot more than producing the web site. What we always like is the potential for storytelling, about other forms of storytelling, about Rotterdam. On the website, there are articles that range from activism to fantasy stories or reports from actual events—but the way in which we try to tell the stories is to be more fantastic, to shine a different light upon things. It is our way of trying to reveal how weird Rotterdam is, basically. The web site is a place for us to address things that are happening in this city. Like, for example, this “Eye of Rotterdam” award. This is a great thing: the city hands out an award—an eye in a pyramid—for basically stasi-neighborhood-watch tactics. It is great to use this government stuff with our ideas, because it fits—when you have a city that produces this kind of stuff, advertisements for this kind of citizen-spy action— it is inherently weird stuff. With WHY-Rotterdam, we try to amplify even more what is being given to us by the government.

SRK: Do you think the way you approach your ideas/actions is through parody? To go much farther than people might expect in order to challenge people with stepping back and taking a better look at what is happening around them, through a parody of “real” information?

Peter: A parody...hmmm.

Christine: Sometimes you just have to put things side-by-side, and that can already begin to reveal something. For example, when doing research, any additional research that people don't do on their own adds to a greater understanding...of course, it is not just informing people. It is more putting certain facts side-by-side through our own interpretations. Sometimes you find out people don't even know basic facts...and we get called paranoid!

Peter: Paranoid is simply someone in possession of all the facts. It is the way we are looking at the city, what we call innbetween-ness—going to different corners in the city, a type of investigation, being able to get information from multiple sources.

SRK: Right now, what are the two of you doing together, as projects beside the web site?

Christine: Do you know the Supervision 3000 project? (<http://www.supervision3000.tk>)

SRK: I want to point out, in relation to what work you have manifested in Rotterdam and why you continue to work here, there is a current vein in art related to public manifestation, critical commentary and things not always associated with traditional art practice. Do you consider yourselves artists in the traditional sense, or conceptualists, or maybe just cultural dissidents?

Christine: We feel we are tapping into ways of working that are not categorized. We don't necessarily fit into the art world, and then we also don't fall into an activist's corner either. We don't have any real strong, traditional activist way of working, although we associate and know those kinds of groups. If you say the artist's role is to irritate, in order to break with a notion or consensus reality...well, you can say this is quite traditional, citing examples from Kafka to Fluxus to Situationists...and I like that notion much better than a notion of being a social worker. I am interested in chasms, the conflict—to really stir things up. And maybe that is something you read that artists once did, that they changed the consensus reality in some way.

Peter: That is something that is essential. And this kind of traditional artist model is very lacking in Rotterdam where the trend is far more to be a social worker.

Christine: I am more interested in the Dada way of doing things, like what they did in public space, in so many different disciplines: performance, writing, publishing maga-

zines. Yeah, I wouldn't say I am interested in copying that, but I am interested in how they looked at their life and times and made something out of it.

Peter: And, it was honest. These examples are interesting for us because I think they involve individuals who put their life and work together. You know, they weren't going around saying, "I will do my Dadaist thing when I get my grant!" In the 1930s, there wasn't a thing such as art grants, and it is interesting for us to look at how they sustained their practice.

Christine: This is a very interesting question or topic which we would like to address within the next Civic TV; to invite people who are proposing an alternative strategy and then to explain how they actually are doing it, how they can live from it. Not that we want to know their bank account balance. Just ask the question, "What channels exist out there for alternative ways of life?"

SRK: Yes, because it is often the case that people who are doing the most radical actions, with or without the umbrella of being Art, do work as a sound technician for a good concert hall. Or some other job that pays them enough money, where furthermore they put all their cash into their artistic practice. That is just how they continue on. Maybe that isn't the answer that many people want to hear, but you have to take that into account when looking at methods for survival as an artist...

Christine: I think it is almost a taboo to admit it! Many people do have a twenty-hour a week job that they limit to only so many hours so that they have enough time left to make their own work. I don't just assume everyone who is making good work is funded by the RKS...

Peter: This is how we see our own work, like WHY-Rotterdam...it is an important action for us. We put things on it that are on our minds—and not to sound too big about it, but we put our whole existence up there, everything that we deal with from when we wake until we go to sleep.

Christine: We even put up on the web site our RKS grant denial letter! We want to break that taboo that artists don't talk about how they sustain themselves—it would be good to get some sort of local knowledge base together. I know there are official studies done on economic survival, the sustainability of artists, but we want to look at it on a more personal level.

SRK: It is nice that you brought up this taboo of sharing one's artistic/economic stability, because it relates to a number of conversations I have been having in the last few weeks where people ask me, "How do you manage to survive here?" There are some artists who are here in Rotterdam living under-the-radar, so to say. And I often wonder when I bring this up in conversation, whether that makes people nervous, in the way that some artists get by without officially being part of the legal system...

Christine: We also don't shy away from discussing the fact that there are many compromising situations involved in remaining in Rotterdam. For us, it is exactly that. I don't

think people are used to this different way of sustaining your life. Even our families have problems with this way of living and they often wonder how we can sleep at night...but hey, we are not criminals!

Peter: Let's take Western artists, Canadian, American, E.U.—what does it mean to be an Austrian, Canadian or American artist in the Netherlands, and how did you get there? How is it prescribed that you should be there? Well, it's easy when you have enough money...it is a very blurry part in the written bureaucracy of how this should happen for artists. But also, how do you want to work? Can you actually do what you want to do in Rotterdam within a three-month tourist Visa? Can you do that with a residency permit? Can you do it with an invitation from a gallery? This is something that since we have been living here has become very important to address within our work, and to realize how this situation affects one's life, one's artwork.

Christine: Yes, it interferes with your basic right to settle somewhere of your choice. It is a very marginalizing exclusionism.

Peter: It is very interesting for us, in our work, to get really deep into this legal situation. It is pressing down on us personally at the moment. When you supposedly have this free movement between countries, you want to believe it is true. In our case of going back and forth between Holland and Austria, you are sometimes having your passport checked, and officials are taking down your information, and it makes you wonder where that information goes. OK, one could be paranoid, and I think that is what they want. And it might not be so bad, but who knows? What do they really want and at what point do you really get "checked up" on? Do you really need that shit? Hey, sometimes you just can't plan it that you are going to end up in a city like Rotterdam, and decide to stay, and it takes time to realize how you are going to become self-sustainable in such an environment. - end -



Cops and Robbers, 2001



Jongens III, 2002

February 26, 2004

Interview with Wietse Eeken

S.R. Kucharski: In an earlier conversation with other artists, I brought up the term avant-garde, in order to solicit their opinion to whether avant-garde, as a definition for artists' practice, even mattered anymore. For one of them, they were more interested in our daily use of the word contemporary...

Wietse: Well, it defines almost everything today—contemporary. I don't know about the word avant-garde, I haven't really bothered thinking much on it. Because, I don't think my work is avant-garde.

SRK: One thing I do believe about the term and use of avant-garde is you can't apply it to yourself. It is almost a term that makes whatever it is addressing become history, or places it in the past...

Wietse: Yeah, it becomes passé.

SRK: Since you can't make anything be avant-garde visual art, it has quite a strange usage in the visual art language. Yet still, one often sees it applied in language related to the description of music and film...

Eeken: Or literature. Well, you hear it in definition of what was, or what was in the past, what was considered avant-garde. This was from a time when the World was a lot smaller... or bigger... I think bigger. Avant-garde was applied to groups of people who did uniquely weird stuff in the arts, and then that became commonplace over time. Nowadays, everything that you do, everything you make, someone else might be doing the same thing on the other side of the world. So, I don't get the idea of avant-garde, and I think it is just labeling, to make things sound interesting.

SRK: On the other hand, do you think the art world, or business side of art, the galleries and museums, are in search of this avant-garde work?

Wietse: Sure, yeah, everybody is looking for something vernieuwend, which is a thing in Holland which is like contemporary, which is actually in itself annoying—it is an idea that as an artist you always have to come up with something new, to be new, to be different. That doesn't actually apply to people who make art, because if you're just busy making your work, you don't think about whether something is avant-garde or vernieuwend—you look around and at what's going on and you react to it. But I do know of too many ways in which people react on this idea of the new and what's hot, and I think that is really bad way of working, actually. Because in this way one always has to continually change the attitude and way of working, in the hope you will make something that has market value. I think this is the problem with art now, because too much emphasis is put on hypes and what's hot, and a lot of people just run around after it, chase it. It's a bit silly.

SRK: Do you find that when you visit museums and galleries that you run into work that you think is inspiring, interesting, something that surprises you in the way that you think this might be something you haven't seen before?

Wietse: Sometimes, yeah, but not very often. I am very critical. I am more interested in work that inspires me, more than looking for something that you could change in a way to use it as one's own. I like to see work that makes me tingle. I think of it as a kick in the pants. It is not to influence myself, but to get a vibe, to feel and to know that there is really great stuff happening around me, which pushes me to do my own work, to push me to make the things that are in my own head.

SRK: Have you then succeeded in surrounding yourself with artists in Rotterdam that do that for you?

Wietse: Well, yeah, it is more the energy that people have which influences me—the people who are so fixated on making their own work. I tend to be a bit lazy, so I really like people who are intensely working on their art to be around me...

SRK: It makes you think, “Shit, I better get in my studio, ASAP...”

Wietse: Yeah, definitely. I want that same intensity of feeling in my work, too.

SRK: So, how long have you been in Rotterdam and what made you stay?

Wietse: From 1998. In the second year of my academy study I came to live in Rotterdam. Before Rotterdam, I lived in Leiden. As an artist, I feel like Rotterdam has more potential for people like me to be an artist, than say Leiden. Leiden has this smallness in the city that I don't feel comfortable with. I tend to get bored easily. In Rotterdam, there are a lot of things happening and a lot of people doing different kinds of art, music, etc. I enjoy that, going places, seeing things happening.

SRK: Do you think there are also more autonomous groups of artists doing collective things here in Rotterdam over Leiden?

Wietse: Yes, definitely, although I must say there are good things happening in Leiden. Rotterdam has the feel that a lot of things are possible, which might be changing soon, because nowadays I tend to see things get more frustrated because of the politics. On the other hand, it does make one more creative, pushing to find new ways to be active, and I see that more underground events are taking place as a reaction to that. And that is good.

SRK: Well, that seems to usually be the case... that when politics or society gets shitty, it makes people angry and determined to say something, or react upon the disparity...

Wietse: Yeah, ok, things start underground and rise up as more people become aware. But, now that I say it, I am actually amazed at the fact that this isn't happening more.

SRK: That these underground events are staying low-key?

Wietse: Yeah, considering what is going on in Holland with the social politics, and the arts, one would think more people would be mad or frustrated and raising their voice.

SRK: What then do you think are the most important political issues facing artists in Holland?

Wietse: For the art world, there is a lot less money going around, which now that I think about it, isn't that bad. Because less money stimulates people to be more creative. There are a lot of institutions and support that are being torn down. And, I think this can also be said about studio spaces, that it is becoming harder to find good, cheap places to work as an artist or musician. I am lucky to have one, but there are many people who are not so lucky.

SRK: You mean because you are a member of Cucosa.

Wietse: Yeah, in that sense I am lucky, because we have good spaces in the middle of town.

SRK: So how does Cucosa work and how does that benefit your working practice?

Wietse: How does it work? Well, it is a self-governing body (laughs...) ... which means it doesn't actually work (more laughs...). Seriously, it is just a group of artists that run a building, and everyone has their own studio space, and next to that we have an exhibition space, which is always filled. There is actually no organization behind it, it is very low-key, and if something needs to be done, it will be done. Things happen at Cucosa, more than they tend to be organized...

SRK: Do you think that because Cucosa exists as a studio space and a support network, and you are with other local artists, that somehow you get special attention from the Rotterdam art world? Would you say Cucosa is a practical venture?

Wietse: I think it is a practical thing. And yes, we get some attention. But, as a group, we are quite low-key, and we could get more attention, if we wanted to. There is always a problem of deciding whether you want more attention. The general tendency for Cucosa is to keep it where it is at the moment. And that's ok. Officially, Cucosa has been around for only five or six years, so it is still young. But it has always been just a bunch of people trying to have a place to work. In the beginning, Cucosa actually did quite a number of group things, and we were intent on doing group things as a collective. But that watered down a bit over the years, as people decided to focus on their own work. I don't know if it's better, but it works for me, because I don't consider myself much of a team player when it comes to making art.

SRK: What do you think about that though, artists getting together in groups and making collaborative projects?

Wietse: I think it's good! But, I have two different ideas about it. On one hand it's good, it's nice to see people pulling their resources and ideas together and creating something. On the other hand, the work sometimes tends to stay on the same level, as in stuff put together, with compromises. So, while it is a good idea, it's not for me. I wouldn't be able to compromise in certain ways. Still, I always find it amazing when it actually works!

SRK: In one of the other interviews, an artist was saying to me that the art world doesn't always want to acknowledge the group effort...

Wietse: Yeah, probably because there is a perpetuated myth of the solitary artist, who struggles in his studio day and night. It is some glorified, romantic idea of the artist, which most of the time isn't true. But people like to continue to see it this way. They don't want to hear about organized artists—it isn't something that fits their mental picture, I think. But, on the other hand, there are a lot of duos or groups of artists that do interesting work and have been noticed—there are ways. It is easier to have just one face behind the work, just one person. Because otherwise it is harder to see where the work comes from.

SRK: What do you think about the attention that Rotterdam gives to Rotterdam-based artists. Do you think that the local artists are getting enough attention by the galleries, museums, etc.?

Wietse: Well, Rotterdam itself... I don't know. I don't know if the city supports artists in the way it could, or should. I haven't really thought about it, actually. I know that the art scene in Rotterdam is quite fractured—you have all these different collectives here that keep to themselves. Or, maybe I should say there isn't much contact, or that the contact is from meeting people in bars or seeing them at openings. And that is as far as it goes. It is a bit of a shame, but I also think that is the way it is everywhere else, too. Everybody, especially artists, tend to look for groups they can fit in, a little niche. There could be so much more going on if there could be more interaction between these collectives, for the arts.

SRK: I am very interested in that, for the fact that I think we agree there are a lot of collectives here, like Cucosa, Het Wilde Weten, Duende, etc., and then there are many artists who are well known throughout Holland living in this city. There are quite a few spaces that could host a reflection of the artwork that is being made by artists living in this city. Not necessarily make a show because there are a lot of artists here, but put the work in connection, build visual relationships and tie together the work from the different collectives that is speaking to each other. I don't always see there is a real effort to make connections between the art people are making...

Wietse: Well, I have been wondering about that too, why that isn't happening! But, I think nobody sees the need for it. Everybody is more interested in making their own work than in building a new structure to show work. I know it takes a lot of time—the same happens in my situation with Cucosa. There is always a choice you have to make,

are we going to do more, present ourselves more, use our exhibition space to the fullest, invite other people from outside and really mix it up? It could be really interesting, but the question is, who wants to put time into that, who wants to organize it? Because once it starts, this organization becomes a full time job. It's always a good idea to start, but...

SRK: Although there are many different collectives here in Rotterdam, and they are made up of artists who have their own work to think about, they still have the possibility to up the ante and challenge the galleries and the art centers by saying, look, you aren't really representing what is going on in the arts here, and we are the artists and we are going to show you that this is what we see is going on, what is good, and why we are staying here and why we choose to make our work in this city/scene. That might not be happening at a big enough level for people to notice at the moment. We are then left with the question, what about the other art institutions like the CBK, and TENT, whoever runs Las Palmas, etc., picking this vibe up and doing something about it?

Wietse: Yeah, I wonder what they're doing, actually! Personally, I have no idea what they are doing. I think most of these spaces are too theme based within their programming, and they look too much to fitting work within their themes. Also, and I have the same problem, an artists' documentation has to be available to the curators from these institutions. My documentation isn't on the Internet, and it isn't on the CBK web site. So, if you're not in the database, you don't exist. I think curators should go out and visit studios once a day, and check out what is really going on. I don't have the idea that they are going for it, so to say. I sometimes have the critique that they are just looking for big names, in order to bring in an audience. But, as an artist, one has to go after it, too, and I must say I haven't been very good at it lately!

SRK: That might be true, and where I come from in the States, you do have to go for it—you have to run a business behind your art practice. It is almost a requirement to get out of the academy to show you know how to do it!

Wietse: Well, in Holland you should have to, too! But that is also why there are all these collectives of artists—everyone in there has their own small world of existence, you have your connections and you don't have to be worried about what is outside.

SRK: Ok, but what I was told by many different people, first thing when I arrived here, was that the way it works for galleries here in Holland, is that the people who run them really get off on discovering you, as an artist. And, shopping yourself around, really flies in the face of this predominant attitude. That even if you have a portfolio, documentation, everything is up-to-date and you present yourself as respectable, articulate, etc., it isn't proper etiquette.

Wietse: Well, how are they going to find you then? That is a tough one.

SRK: It is a dilemma, for artists that are busy making work and following through by searching for a way to present it outside of collectives, or even let's just say their own

studios! Yeah, so now I'm talking about community...

Wietse: Well, that is the way I work. I know people, they know people, and I know a lot of people that run galleries, and I always talk to them, and they always ask how my work is progressing, but they don't come by to see it!

SRK: Well, if we are talking about how the system isn't working in some ways, maybe we should question if the art market system here is dead. I am sure the gallery owners have something to say about this.

Wietse: Well, I don't think there is an art market here anyway. Nobody buys art! Ok, there are a lot of people buying art, but most of the time they buy household stuff instead. I know a lot of people my age, who have good jobs, and they make a lot of money, but they don't buy art, because they are not interested in it, they don't see the point. There aren't many big collectors or buyers in Rotterdam or Holland, and it is a bit of a shame. Because if you go abroad, you can see that there is more attention to art and its value, to the artists, than in Holland. Sometimes it is really hard to say, "Yeah, I'm an artist," because everyone looks at you like you're one of these guys on the dole! And that has something to do with the way art is subsidized, this big culture of getting subsidies and grants—there isn't much art that is being sold—it isn't a lifestyle of living off your art, it is one of living off your subsidies.

SRK: I recently read a statement in the public sphere that read: Subsidies make artists poor.

Wietse: It is really hard to say... well, for instance, the Wik is a really bad idea, but for a lot of people I know, they are really happy with it, because it is guaranteed income. When on the Wik, you get punished for making more money than your allowed too, which is stupid. So what happens is, people don't end up making enough money, or just make only so much money, in order to keep the Wik. And, it doesn't actually amount to much more artistic productivity.

SRK: Do you think artists here in Holland are not looking beyond anything other than to remain stable?

Wietse: I think so. But, on the other hand, there are a lot of people who disagree with me. I am NOT saying all the subsidies should be banned. I just think people tend to get a bit lazy because of the subsidy system—you don't have to go out and attempt to find money to do your work, you just hang around, do some stuff. I think the Wik system works a bit counter-productive, in that way. I don't think it keeps people financially poor, but maybe mentally...

SRK: In the States, artists work without subsidies; we have awards, and that gives a whole conceptual difference to the application and possibility of receiving public or private funds to make artwork—this idea you apply with your work in order to win...

Wietse: Well, it is the same with grants here—you apply for money, and if the review

panel doesn't think your work is up to it, you don't get the money. There are instances of artists who are selling very well, and they still get grants every year, and I am wondering, why? If they are able to show all over the world, why do they still need to be subsidized? That money could go to someone who is just starting, who has ideas and needs support to work them out. It could just be that those who are established just know how to apply for the money. But, this issue of money should never miss-sway you from making your work, ever!

SRK: Well of course, there is no excuse to say, "I am not getting funding for my work, so I can't make it."

Wietse: No, being funded is just another way to make your work. Without funding, one just has to be more creative in producing! Artists sometimes have to be more creative than in simply a conceptual way, they have to be creative in a productive way as well.

SRK: I think there are a lot of people doing that, but I also could say that it is mostly the non-Dutch artists who are living and working here in Rotterdam who are outside the system of subsidies. Because there are so many rules also that disqualify one from subsidy grants because of being a *buitenlander*. One does have to be more creative, weigh the options, figure things out and get over on the system that relies so heavily on subsidy support.

Wietse: Well, I think it is just more fun that way! The way of life after receiving subsidies can get too easy! Not that I am at all behind the idea of the struggling artist, because that is also complete bollocks! If you want to do something, just go out and do it! And if it takes a long time, because it is difficult to get it done, I think it is more gratifying. For me, the most important thing about being an artist is the making of art. I get my kicks out of making it, and once it is finished, cool. Of course I want to eventually show it.

SRK: In my first reaction to the situation here in Rotterdam, I was very excited about the number of art institutions like TENT, Witte de With, etc., that exist to show art, without a concern to the selling of the work. They are about showing young, contemporary artists that are making work in the *now*. And, supposedly reflective of the local art scene in this city, in order to bring everyone together. In the States, there are really just the galleries, and nothing else, because as a young artist, emerging artist, whatever you want to call it, you can't expect to show at museums, although you can aim high for this sort of recognition. Besides the galleries, there are only a handful of "art centers" that are setup to bring work to the public, without an economic basis for existence. When I arrived here in Holland, I thought, wow, here is a place that has institutions that bypass this gallery system based on money. Granted, I think it is fair to say there are many gallery owners that do their utmost to show work they just believe in. How do we get more spaces with a non-commercial agenda, and get them to pay more attention to what is going on in the local art scene?

Wietse: Well, the only way I can see is to every time invite the curators and directors to your studio. The thing is, most times I run into curators associated with the places you mentioned, they say, “So Wietse, when are you going to show your work here?” And I always say, “Yeah, tomorrow if you want!” But then they say, “Well why don’t you put in a proposal.” Why should I put in a proposal? I just make my things, why do I need to say, “I would like to make this kind of work in your place because blahblahblah...?” I don’t work like that. So I always say, “When are you coming around to my studio?” I mean, I often have known these people for a long time, but nobody has ever come to my studio!! And, I am also thinking, these people are the programmers, they know my work from other exhibitions, they know I exist—why should I go ask and submit a proposal when it doesn’t relate to my work? I make sculpture, not installations...

[Editors Note: Three weeks after this interview, Wietse Eeken was asked by TENT for a studio visit...how very interesting.]

SRK: Well, I think there might be two ways to react to what you just said. One, it could be there are just too many artists out there for curators to visit every single studio—the art world is saturated with many people making artwork, and damn good artwork, too, I might add! Two, institutions or art centers have been in a trend of having installation-type programming for a few years now. It is, of course, their prerogative in the end. I wonder if maybe there just isn’t that much curating going on here in Rotterdam?

Wietse: Well, there is much more curating going on than you think, actually. But, you know, there is a bit of disorganization and I don’t know how I can put it without actually offending people... There must be more people who are curators, or curators-to-be, out there and one would think they should be active enough today for us to not have to ask your question in the first place.

SRK: What are you working on then in the studio, and what is it you desire to show in your artwork?

Wietse: Now, I am making sculpture, which is autonomous sculpture. I am always playing around with textures, skins and layers within the concept of the work. What I would really like to do is make even larger work, and, maybe... there we go... installation-type-work-stuff. Wait, installation isn’t the right word—I am thinking of bringing together several sculptural elements to make one work. I think talking about art is often stupid, and I have a really hard time with it, mainly because I would rather be making it. On the other hand, I have very certain, big ideas of how things should be, in regard to my work, and to other people’s work.

SRK: All right then, tell me, give me some of your big ideas, for your own work!

Wietse: Ok, then... there is not enough focus on sculpture. I think that is really sad, because sculpture is brilliant. I think there should be more sculpture around, and that is what I want to do. I want to make big things that people will like or dislike, or just be seen! I am one of these artists that like little things within work—I like details. I like seeing that the details in a work are being thought about, addressed. I would like to see

more of that. Most of the time, I see good work, but a bit shoddy in the details.

SRK: So you're making a call to the world for the revival of detail and hard work...

Wietse: Aesthetics!

SRK: Oh, there you go! You said it now!

Wietse: I am a sucker for aesthetics! You know, that is something that as an artist bothers me a lot—that sometimes you see really nice work but the presentation is so badly done, and it is so sad actually. Aesthetics and presentation are really important to me.

SRK: I think that even though you say that about art and your own work, it is a statement that can be applied to many things. Doing something, in and of itself, doesn't necessarily add anything by the action, so what I hear you asking is that, anywhere one goes to see and experience art work, there should be greater attention given to the details, be it conceptual or in form, and for a general revival of aesthetics. Now, in regard to your own work, how do you find the details, make the details, and in the sculptures you are making, are you giving us details to who Wietse Eeken is as a person?

Wietse: My work has to do with a relationship to everything. I get my ideas from watching cartoons, seeing what goes on in the world, see what is going on outside in the street, and I mix those different things together in my art work. I toy around with a lot of images I have in my head, and I apply them to one sculpture. Sculpture is somewhat problematic, because it is often one object. To get several layers of meaning in the work is always difficult. That is something I really like in artwork—the object is in itself what it is, but I as a viewer can read many things from it. All my work, they are all little stories. I don't want to tell the story too much, and I often put in several layers that can be misinterpreted, in order to turn around the meaning of the piece, depending upon what you read from it. That is where the details come in, because details are what are important for a real story to be told.

SRK: Have you have any chance to talk about the show you made for Bruce Gallery last summer? Do you want to describe that show, and explain your position within what happened?

Wietse: I haven't yet had the chance to talk about it at all. I was invited by Bruce last summer to make work, and the way they organize the space is they invite you for two weeks to make something within the gallery space, and then they show it for a month. They come up with a theme for you, and you have to make work that reflects that theme. They do look at the work you have done previously, and try to make a theme that is somewhat appropriate. The theme they came up with for me was Kill Your Brother, which I thought was really funny, but a bit too obvious for me. It wasn't very...subtle. But that wasn't the biggest problem or challenge—it was that I had to produce something in two weeks. The way I work is I make models; I make models in clay and then cast final pieces in concrete, which takes time. And two weeks, I thought it wasn't

enough time... actually, it wasn't enough time. So, I had to compromise a little bit. I had to work quite fast, and usually I take much longer in making a sculpture. Usually, you have solutions to problems in the development of work, and after thinking over your solution for one week, you realize it isn't a very good one, and you have to think up something better. I didn't have time for that, so I set out to make a work in which I took the theme quite literally. I thought of the theme, Kill Your Brother, and I thought about war, you know, it's biblical. I decided to make a Cain and Able-like story.

SRK: So please describe the work.

Wietse: I made two separate, painted concrete sculptures of boys with one lying on the floor, with his neck broken, literally. The other one was just standing there, looking sheepish. It was just two freestanding sculptures in a completely white space. That was, basically, the work. There were a lot of angry reactions over the title of the show "Kill Your Brother." However, no one actually bothered to come in and talk to me about it, and the idea of the gallery is that people can walk in and meet the artist as they are making their work. The reactions came in the form of letters to the gallery. That didn't happen for me, and it was a bit of a let down. You know, it felt a bit empty—the idea was interesting, but in the end the experience didn't happen as I thought it would. But, I thought the work itself was really good!

SRK: In its relation to the space and in relation to how the gallery sits and presents its works/shows to the street, I would have thought that more people would have come in and discussed with you the meaning of your work. It is surprising that a better critique wasn't generated, and that there wasn't much engagement. Do you think the work was too violent?

Wietse: I think that the threshold to go in the space was too big, mostly because the theme, Kill Your Brother, was printed on the window facing outside of the gallery space. The threshold is always a bit high when you're working in galleries, because I think most people consider galleries as window shopping—they just like to look in, with no idea of going in. I had some good reactions, from many different people. But no real critical discussion happened, which was again a bit of a shame.

SRK: Do you think that, with your work, you are trying to shock people?

Wietse: Yeah, sometimes I do this intentionally. But, I like to always have something comical in my work—it has to be funny; I like to have a little twist in the work itself. I am not trying to be disturbing, per se. Shocking isn't necessary, because I would rather have people thinking about what is going on in the work than being shocked by the work, or offended, or whatever.

SRK: Do you feel that there is a problem in art with too much attention being given to work(s) that shock one to attention, therefore less attention is given to artists who exhibit work that is curious, subtle and twisting one's engagement with it?

Wietse: I think most work I see is too flat. I like multiple layers within work, and some-

times you miss, or at least I miss it, in what I see in the galleries. I like to see work that has a story behind it. What can I say other than multiple layers! Hey, it isn't my job to convince you of what you should be looking for in art, and I am not even trying to do this. I really just want to see more sculpture out there!

SRK: ...if you could have your way...!

Wietse: If I could have my way, all painting would be banned!! (laughs...). And we are not even talking yet about video art! (more laughs...) Look, there are so many ways of making work, and I just do this region: sculpture. I have many ideas, and what do I do? I make them in concrete! I do it because concrete has a certain quality to it, which is hard to find in other material. So, this is me, my work and the way I work.

SRK: The way you talk about your work and consider your work, in my opinion, is quite traditional. You talk a lot through the idea of aesthetics...

Wietse: I am a very traditional artist, in that sense.

SRK: I am assuming that that is just the way it goes for yourself, but we haven't even discussed—like you said yourself—video work, or new media. Do you ever consider yourself making video work, or that your current sculptural work is competing against new media art?

Wietse: I don't see myself competing against it anymore. My idea is that video and new media isn't my thing. I like a lot of video work and performances actually, but it just isn't my making thing. That is why at this point in my life, I wouldn't do that kind of work. The only thing I think I know, and definitely the only thing I want to do now, is make sculpture. There it is. It might be simple in a sense, but it is being truthful to myself. - end -



Mixed Company, installation view and detail, 2004, Kunst & Complex, Rotterdam

March 29th, 2004

Interview with Jennifer Stillwell & Amanda Ross-Ho

S.R. Kucharski: What brought the two of you together to collaborate, and what brought you here to Rotterdam for a three-month residency at Kunst & Complex?

Jennifer: Amanda and I met at another residency in Canada outside of Toronto, at the Gibraltar Point Centre for the Arts. That was over two years ago now. Since then, we have mostly communicated over email, with some short visits in-between. We made a couple of projects together at Gibraltar Point, and afterwards we decided to keep communicating with each other because of that experience.

Amanda: We were both there as individual artists, working on video and/or installations, and since it was such a small residency with ten artists at the place, everyone got to know everyone else very quickly. Jennifer and I noticed a lot of similarities within our own individual processes, and we got along as friends. We share a similar sense of humor I think. Originally, we were just going to help each other out on a few of our own projects, for practical reasons, but then we ended up collaborating on a video piece plus other short conceptual musings.

SRK: Was video a new medium for the both of you to work in, allowing you both to experiment more freely together at the time?

Amanda: It was for me, and I had proposed my residency stay in order to immerse myself in video, which I hadn't done much of before. Jen had a ton of video experience beforehand.

Jennifer: I have worked with video for quite a few years now.

Amanda: After the residency at Gibraltar Point, we kept in touch, and began to plan future collaborative projects, albeit long distance. We made two videos since starting to work together, but always there was a plan to take on a larger project. Since we live far away from each other, Jennifer living in Winnipeg and myself in Chicago, we decided to propose a second residency to accomplish the production of the larger work.

Jennifer: Since we both work with found materials and situations, it seemed that the best idea was to meet on a common ground, so to say, and at a new, unfamiliar place.

Amanda: Yes, and one can only plan when apart. We had a very strong dialogue over email since our first collaborations at Gibraltar Point, but we still felt that we needed to come together in order to work out our ideas. We came upon the residency at Kunst & Complex, and it suited our schedules, budget, and timeframe. Plus, I had come to Holland a few times in the past, and was interested in being here for longer. That is basically how it worked out for us to end up here collaborating as artists.

SRK: What working practice did you establish after you arrived in Rotterdam, in order to get the most out of your three month stay?

Jennifer: Everyday we have been documenting situations and things we are both attracted to, which has culminated in tons of photos and many hours of video. We have been recording our maneuvers through the city, our studio practice and our social actions and interactions. It's been this process of documentation that has piled up over the past three months, which is what we are working with and still sorting through at the moment.

Amanda: Part of our original plan was that each of us had individual projects that needed to be completed, as both of us had obligations to upcoming shows back in the States and Canada. We both knew we had to finish these projects, so we thought, well, we will work on those projects and then cultivate our experiences while at the residency into a collaborative piece. We had an initial idea for working together before we left the States, as I said earlier, but after arriving here and working here at Kunst & Complex, the original idea expanded, which we hadn't anticipated, and took on a new direction.

This new body of work has developed mainly through consuming our social situation here, and really from getting to know each other on a more personal level. We had only, in actually, spent about two months worth of time together since we met, and when you start to work with another person on a day-to-day basis, you gain a lot more experience. It has been really awesome and totally cool! (laughs...)

SRK: Did working collaboratively start off slow when you first arrived?

Jennifer: Yes, it took about a month. We had come to work on a specific project together, but we didn't know exactly what form it would take.

Amanda: We were also just learning from each other, learning to work and adjust to each other, on a level outside of just what kind of art we make. And, we spent quite a bit of time learning about our surroundings. We spent a good amount of time, in the beginning of our stay, just dragging objects and ideas, just stuff, into our studio in order to get the work process started. We just needed some stuff to play with!

Jennifer: I spend a lot of time contemplating over decisions when building work, and although we were continually shooting video and taking photographs, it took time for concepts to surface and develop.

Amanda: My process centers around externalizing my ideas, searching around for ideas in shooting video, taking photographs and in writing. Jen's process is more internal. We had to initially work out the balance between those two approaches to making artwork.

Jennifer: I would say Amanda is more spontaneous about things, where as I like to spend a lot more time editing.

SRK: From this issue of balance comes a question about collective authorship, and now that you have spent three months building work together, can you talk a bit about this aspect of working collaboratively?

Amanda: It has been very good for me as an individual to be here and to work collaboratively because it has influenced and changed my previous career-centric, singular artist ideas.

Jennifer: This collaboration has generated a huge amount of dialogue about our previous individual practices and our joint efforts.

Amanda: Even with the video piece that I made for myself outside the overall collaboration, Jen helped to shoot and edit it, and at the point of completion of the work, I thought that it was more our video, and it was difficult for me to say it was only my work.

Jennifer: It is the same with the video work I produced as well, because what we had been documenting together over the last three months was certainly influential on my piece.

Amanda: This collaborative dialogue that we have has been such an influence and I am now totally fine with giving up ideas of individual authorship. It just isn't that important to me anymore. As an analogy, I think of our collaboration as like a Rapper and a DJ pair, as a relationship that has checks and balances, and we put forward our strengths to build new works. The collaboration has allowed me to meditate on the idea of authorship and in a way has allowed me to exorcise my demons about letting go of the importance of individual authorship.

Jennifer: This process of working together has allowed me to be much more self-reflective. The constant dialogue about work between us has been very influential to my own processes as an individual artist.

Amanda: I think this experience of intensely working together for three months will resonate within our own practices in the future, for sure.

SRK: What is the new direction, or what did you discover in the new works you made? What is your collaboration-work about?

Amanda: The party installation titled *Mixed Company*, which is the piece that most relates to our initial plan for collaborating, has to do with the theme or idea of social residue—what is left over from human activity. We were looking at that concept, and specifically looking at parties, and the residue as a still life, as well as the landscape that emerges from activity. We were looking at objects as if...

Jennifer: ...they had a life of their own!

Amanda: We had developed this plan back in Chicago at a certain point, as an idea to re-classify objects in a new system of orders...

Jennifer: ...a hierarchy of objects...

Amanda: Yeah, thinking of them as having...

Jennifer: ...a living structure!

Amanda: Yeah!

Jennifer: I am finishing your sentences, I hope that is ok?!? (laughs...)

Amanda: Yeah, that is totally fine! (more laughs...)

Jennifer: Even at Gibraltar Point, we were interested in what happened between the artists when they left their studios and what was happening in the evening, which was essentially that everyone would socialize and party. The next day, we looked at the collective residue from the party as essentially a record of the life from the night before.

Amanda: Working off of that idea, we have been working here on a hyper-documentation of living as an experience. Basically, we have been immersing ourselves socially and documenting it to the max—and not just our social interactions. We have shot about 30 hours of video and hundreds of photographs. Some have more or less direct themes, such as trash on the street, and looking at that as a residue of social activity as well. A lot of our “images” just happen, yet everything comes from some attention to our social situation while living here in Rotterdam.

Jennifer: We haven't even sifted through all the video we shot, and what we have reflected upon to date is just now starting to make a “certain” sense. There is a large amount of information that is being presented back to us from our own documentation. Especially in the past two to three weeks, the mass of information is starting to take a clear form...

SRK: So you definitely plan on working with your source material in the coming future?

Amanda: Yes. We have completed five short videos so far with using our material collected during the residency, but we have so much more to utilize. We plan on creating a much longer, more complex video piece, in contrast to these five shorts we have now. One of the things that we have come to realize since being here is an issue with language, and it has made its way into the work. It is something I hadn't anticipated. What has been happening in the last three months is we have been comparing and contrasting the use of language, between ourselves as well as the many people we meet here in Rotterdam. There are also the cultural contrasts, mostly having to do with language. Translating and language exchange has been a huge theme. For us, language is also a type of social residue. Maybe, it is because of the embedded poetics that come from

language in certain social situations.

SRK: Do you think through your “social investigation” of Rotterdam you have come to any obvious things, or reactions that are particular to the city or cultural scene of Rotterdam?

Amanda: We both find it to be an incredibly “social centric” place. It is partially due to our temporary situation too.

Jennifer: I didn’t expect it to be this way. Of course, most art scenes have a social scene attached to it, but here in Rotterdam it seems extreme. For example, and this is evident in our photographs, that there is huge amount of drinking that goes on here! I didn’t expect it to be so, so...perfect for our project! (laughs...) Everyone we have met seems to really socialize a lot!

Amanda: What ended up happening is the bar became our laboratory, so to say. It became a theater combined with a laboratory, and our work started to take on a performative aspect because of it. We have been talking quite a bit about social performance, and how social activity is parallel to theatrics. And, we have been partying insanely since we got here, all the time! (big laughs...) But seriously, partying has become the medium for a dialogue. It is part of our work to be “on location”, and documenting our own social performance as much as passively investigating what is happening around us.

SRK: Besides your time investigating and watching what is happening in the social sphere of the arts and creating, as you say a “laboratory”, have you felt anything has spoken back to you or to your own working methods as artists? Can you say your investigation has been an experience of placing yourselves in front of a mirror?

Jennifer: I feel like there is a lot of freedom that I have encountered after working this way, compiling information and then sifting through it to discover new things. Usually, I start a project with an idea in my head, and work towards making that very thing. But here and in this collaboration, making this action of documenting an everyday activity, I find that the situation has been very fresh. To infuse your life with your art, on a day-to-day basis, is really nice. And, it has to do with having this residency, which is giving me time to have this relationship to the work.

Amanda: Also, I think the experience of discovering our individual processes, and how they work or don’t work together, has been a particular experience. There are many things we learned since arriving here about how we work differently. We had to make these...not compromises, but having to translate to each other what we were thinking, constantly.

As far as what we are getting out of this residency, or what awareness we have come to since being here, I think we have learned to be more intuitive, as artists. We have learned to be free with our working processes, and work in a way that is different that how I am personally used to working back in the States, which is more production oriented. As in, “look, here is my product!” In Rotterdam, it has been less about making

pieces of art, but generating a huge dialogue and a robust collection of concepts that have been developing since we got here. But, it is really this freedom in working that has been reflected back to us and on our way of working.

I feel that in the States, artists I know are immersed in certain “career tracks”, and I don’t feel that here in Rotterdam. I feel that people are making work, producing, but there isn’t this overwhelming career pressure that artists are hyper-sensitive to, like back in the States. And, so many people in Rotterdam seem to be making work with this attitude in their minds, and it is a whole different relationship to art making.

SRK: Inside this “new feeling” you got while being here, have you found anything to be influential on your ways of thinking or methods of working, or being influenced by other artists working here in Rotterdam?

Jennifer: We haven’t really been visiting any artist’s studios outside of Kunst & Complex, unfortunately.

Amanda: I feel like our experience has been less art-centric and more life-centric.

Jennifer: We hang out mostly with artists, and go to openings, but I still can’t say that anything has been overridingly influential.

SRK: Do you find it strange that you are hanging out with Rotterdam artists, and they are coming to see and experience your work, and yet you haven’t introduced yourself to their artwork, or their artistic activities?

Amanda: It is weird, and because of previously being immersed in the career oriented lifestyle that I was talking about earlier, I have had feelings of guilt by not learning about all the artists I regularly see and talk with, getting under the skin of the arts scene, so to say. But, it has been so intense for us, making the work, and I haven’t felt...well, I think we have been in dialogue with the artists here, just another kind.

Jennifer: There is certainly a dialogue going on between us and other local artists here, but it hasn’t been about their work. Of course, since we have been here, we have seen a few exhibitions from artists who are local to Rotterdam. But, our interaction between artists has been mostly in social ways.

SRK: So then, are you saying that the social interaction between artists, here in Rotterdam, is more important, and that visual art, the careers of these artists, takes more of a back seat to the social setting?

Jennifer: Well, I think that it takes time to make work, and that people are dealing with their own work “behind the scenes”, so to say.

Amanda: At home in the States, I attend quite a few openings and look at a lot of artwork, but I also feel that there is little dialogue happening between me and the artists. And that is constantly a source of dissatisfaction. Here in Rotterdam, I am not look-

ing at much work by other artists, so the fact that I am not in a dialogue about it isn't as shallow. There just hasn't been that much opportunity for discussion here. I also felt that the exhibitions and openings we had the chance to visit were on a much larger scale than I am used to, as in shows at museums and art centers. I am used to small alternative gallery shows. This in itself makes interaction and a dialogue about art, in Rotterdam, less intimate. Back in Chicago, there is a core group of 20-30 people that attend the same openings regularly, which makes a close community for artists. But then again, it sometimes is just the same 20-30 people every month standing around in a gallery drinking beer...

SRK: So what is your opinion of the art community you have met here in Rotterdam?

Amanda: I feel like people are very private.

Jennifer: I immediately think of how international the community is here in Rotterdam. But, I also agree with Amanda, at least in respect to the artists we have met, that people are private. And, this has also been our experience with the artists here at Kunst & Complex. Artists we have met don't talk much about the work that they are making.

Amanda: It seems like there is a lot going on with artists here, but you must have to seek it out and really corner someone to find out what someone is doing with their artwork/art-practice. It is hard to say what my opinion is on the community, and I think I would have to stay here a bit longer in order to get a good picture of it. Our time here has been so short, and it seems that getting to know what is really going on unfolds slowly. It is nebulous, and I don't know how I would begin to describe the art scene in Rotterdam.

Jennifer: I think the community here is relaxed. Artists have a much different day-to-day schedule here in Holland than in the States or Canada. We also have taken on this different schedule, this idea of open-ended time...

Amanda: ...and that seems like how the scene is here: one that affords an open schedule, one that isn't as engaged in the so-called "rat race" like I am used to back in the States. Here, I think artists afford themselves more time to socialize and be active in social life. It is also a bit of a fantasy situation. Or at least for us, coming from the States/Canada, it has been an amazing fulfillment of a fantasy to give all our time and energy to the making of art and the social aspects of art, and to just making our artwork at our own pace!

SRK: Do you think, that without all this free time you have given yourselves by taking up this residency, you were more limited in your ways of working collaboratively? You have been saying that the residency has given you time, the social atmosphere which gives space for reflection on one's own work, etc...

Jennifer: It has been ideal for us! It really has been. It would be great to always have 24 hours a day to focus on art, art thoughts, art activity. But this isn't practical for us back home.

Amanda: It has been a huge issue being here and being able to reflect back on my artistic situation back home in the States. I didn't realize how repressed my working process is in the States, because I have never had the opportunity to step back and examine it.

SRK: You must have realized that there are many people who are active in the social art scene here in Rotterdam and are working *and* surviving and finding ways to support their artistic practice. It isn't all parties. Many people do make their artwork everyday and that is their very serious career. If it isn't this way in America, it must have been nice to experience it as a possible way of life.

Amanda: Well, back in the States, I have had to navigate my art practice around my money making job completely. And, in doing so, I have learned to integrate my job into my art and insist on being influenced by it, otherwise I would resent it too much. I try and utilize my job as content for my artwork. Otherwise, it seems such a travesty that I am spending so much time working a job in order to pay my rent. It ends up that I compartmentalize all my free time into tiny segments in order to arrange whatever time I can to working in the studio. The fact that you have to work a job on top of your artistic practice is oppressive. And I knew that before, but coming here to Holland has given me a whole new awareness of what it means to be a professional artist.

SRK: Even though you were only here for three months, can you say you saw or witnessed anything new or strikingly different in the visual arts here in Rotterdam? What is your opinion of what is avant-garde in the arts today?

Jennifer: I am impressed by De Player here in Rotterdam (<http://www.deplayer.nl>), which hosts events once a month, involving music, performances, etc. For me, there isn't a venue like that back home, and often places that could be like De Player tend to become too structured, because of the overwhelming administration of the arts in Canada. The open ended-ness of De Player is special. And, De Player is a place where one can socialize while being immersed in an art viewing context, which I like very much. I was turned on to it.

I also don't think we have seen enough places and artwork to give more of an answer about what is new specifically here...

Amanda: If I was to give a guess about what is new in art or the direction that art is going, I would have to say it is a departure from cool conceptualism, and a return to more intuitive processes and more sincerity in artwork. A return to the genuine, and because of that, more attention is put back towards painting and drawing, or towards work that is more...sensitive. Definitely more attention is being put to an attempt at honesty within artworks.

SRK: Are you saying that being intuitive, sincere and honest is more introspective, and that artwork with these qualities reflects this?

Amanda: Lets just say there is less applied irony, less manipulative actions—artists

being more interested in communication. And I felt that years ago artwork was more defensive than it is now, wrapped up in coolness, in irony. These thoughts could just be related to myself, what I am searching for when making artwork.

SRK: Do think that visual art has to defend itself?

Jennifer: I think it depends on who you talk too. I have many friends who are not in the art scene, and certainly I find myself constantly defending my activities, because they don't understand what I am doing—because art making isn't in the popular culture, it doesn't make money or just asking, "what is it for?" I would say that art making gets attacked by those who stay outside of it and aren't always open to new experiences. As for a direction to go in the arts, I would say there is a focus on improvisational work, work that is more expressive. I myself like work that has non-controlled variables, like chance. Personally, I am trying to work myself away from being too contrived in my work and process.

SRK: Both of your statements make sense in relation to the collaboration over the last three months—you seem to be opening yourselves up to your surroundings and not saying "this is what I am going to make, this is going to be the art." Essentially, you are working as filters to your surroundings. You seem to be working without imposing meaning on the work. You are being active participants in society, and recording, filtering and presenting back the residue of information.

Is this a natural working method for artists, to become cultural producers, or filters, to contemporary society?

Amanda: I guess that one of the issues that has emerged is being an artist is less about the objects and more about the lifestyle. I have come to that realization while being here, that one makes a certain lifestyle choice when they decide to become an artist—you make a specific action in situating yourself in a specific way of looking at life. You become part of a sub-culture. And, this is in itself a theme...that is part of what we have cultivated while being here, investigating this "lifestyle of the artist."

Jennifer: Yes, between our living situation and the studio here, how we eat, how we consume products...all the ways we have to live cheaply or ways we learned to maintain ourselves while focusing on making artwork. These issues are all themes relating to the work we have produced over the last three months. Being an artist is a lifestyle choice.

Amanda: I am thinking that being an artist is an outlaw thing. I am getting really into the idea of being an outlaw. I don't think this is a fresh idea, because there are plenty of outsider artists...

SRK: Well, being an outsider artist and being an outlaw are two different things!

Amanda: Ok, yeah, but what I mean is making work and being a cultural outlaw—trying to subvert expectations, trying to subvert the academic art world, trying to subvert established conventions.

SRK: It seems that you are in an interesting position for the future—while the two of you are now making work together and developing a balance between authorship and investment, and that this work you have made you intend to present to the art world as valid, very soon you are going to stop this collaboration and go back to your individual practices, and back the States and Canada. How do you feel about this at the moment?

Amanda: Well, we're a bit stressed out about it!

Jennifer: Yeah, our collaboration is working perfectly at the moment, and it is difficult to break up the process. We do have a great deal of material to digest, in the form of video and photography, which we will have to get together and work through back home. We will just have to see how our time here manifests a future of working together back home. We have been talking about exhibiting together for upcoming shows and other options for the future.

Amanda: There are some upcoming projects and shows that will keep up our momentum for sure. But, it is difficult, because this collaboration has been very good and we could easily use six more months to develop even bigger works. It takes a long time to develop pieces together within a collaboration I think. We don't have, as of yet, an identity as a collaborative team.

SRK: Are you interested in forming a collaborative identity?

Amanda: I think we are on that cusp, really. The collaboration and the work that comes from it is good, and it is a shame to just cut it off. But at the same time, we realize we have individual practices to consider. I think we are just keeping all doors open right now.

Jennifer: I think our individual practices have really evolved over the course of us emailing each other over the last two years, before we started this residency. It is interesting to see how our individual work evolved and was influenced from this dialogue we have had. I feel we will always continue to work on our own individual works too though even while we collaborate.

SRK: It seems like the logical next step is to organize yourself as an art duo in order to exhibit or present this work you have made. You have of course organized your own individual practices to present to the art world, and now you have to include this extra work and experience from the collaboration. How do you keep the collaboration separate and how do you think you can put it all together?

Amanda: It is new to us, and we have been thinking of how to subvert the idea, or maybe blur the lines, between the individual and the collaboration. Maybe, it is simple enough to just keep thinking outside conventions or simple definitions....

Jennifer: The exhibition we put on here at Kunst & Complex is a combination of individual works plus our collaborations. We know which work is from whom, and we

think that we can place ourselves, the work, together or separated in the same room have it be a more or less complete statement.

SRK: I think your attitude is very good about it. Because other people could come in here, just knowing you for a few months and having no background to your previous art work, and see this presentation of work as a total collaboration, and not be able to pick out any individual characteristics. Does that seem at all troubling or disturbing?

Amanda: Like I said earlier, I have come to a release of all authorship stress. There is one large sculpture I produced, a landscape of text, trash, plants, kitschy objects that are arranged on two tables, which I consider my piece, but Jennifer is part of that piece as well. The creation of that piece exists through a certain dialogue that we have kept up during our residency. I just physically manifested it.

SRK: How do you think that “feeling” you have about the influential nature of your dialogue would be interpreted in the art world, or how would you present that fact to the art world/art viewer?

Jennifer: I think it just depends on how you present the work and to whom you present it too, really. If you are having an exhibition, and you are presenting the work as yourself, then you put your name on it. Period. My name isn’t on the piece that Amanda is talking about, but I know I am somehow in that work. And, I see this piece as relating much more to Amanda’s previous body of work.

Amanda: I think people are becoming more comfortable with the gray area between the individual artist and his/her relation to collaboration. I think that back in the States there are more and more collectives and artists working together forming—more different types of collaborative identities. Personally, I have become more comfortable with not having a dogmatic view of ownership.

SRK: Well, if one looks back a hundred years in to the history of art, you find artists associating themselves with a group, or under some sort of umbrella manifesto to define their working practice. Yet, within or under this umbrella, they continue to mostly produce individual works. And, art history has made a point in recording and attributing work to individual artists, and making effort to point out who did what or what level of contribution was made to the overall movement(s) in art. Essentially, the idea of authorship supported by history is an idea of defining which individual was better, more creative, more important. Even though artists worked together, history often has worked to separate them and their importance to each other.

This group activity, based under a manifesto or an ideological approach to the actual making of artwork, has more or less disappeared in contemporary art. This is what I think at least. And, I also think that from this group legacy we now have, as a logical next step or as a contrast to, many art teams or duos that work in, like Amanda said, a subverted or blurred relation to individual authorship. In relation to this history and to what the two of you are doing here in your collaboration, you are not working under an ideological umbrella—you are the umbrella.

Amanda: I think there is something special that emerges, specifically in regards to collaborative teams: artwork that basically is made through/for/about relationships, social relationships, human relationships, object relationships—work that is based on the experience of experiencing place, people, things and the combination of all three. I think that there isn't an -ism to apply to what we are doing, but it is work about self-awareness, about reflecting on our social relationship, the mechanics of relationships. One deconstructs it, examines it, because it is what is happening at every level of collaboration between two people. You are working with another person, you have to navigate around them, and figure out what dynamics are present. Therefore, often the work produced by a team of artists becomes about this very experience. Your collaboration often is the subject of the work. Our particular work is filled with what is familiar to people on an everyday basis, and that leaves many points of entry to understand the work. For me, this body of work we produced is a portrait of our lives as artists in the form of a traditional still life. I hope for a poetic relationship between the overlap of these themes and the interpretation from the viewer. - end -

NOTES:

THE THEMES:

Artist Duos or Teams, the Group in Art and re-defining terms of the *new* in art practice.

THE PROJECT:

This project is about discussions, with artists, about art, recorded within one hours time. Here then is a collection of conversations, partially based on the artist's work, but also on themes, with an idea to put all the interviews together, showing the different *voices*, but maybe also showing that they share some same ideas, and that these ideas are things I think are important to Rotterdam, or are important to all artists in relation to contemporary art practice. The 'zine is called *Open Issues*, because that is how I feel about these conversations—we aren't giving you a set of answers or solutions to the themes, only showing you that there are some out there...

Open Issues, a product of Tomorrowism: sustainability, engagement, a focus beyond reduction, a wish to improve upon common knowledge by understanding the past or the root of knowledge—a need to understand today's *desire* of tomorrow.

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**For questions, comments or suggestions, email:
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Heliotrope Glance

We have failed a bit
Home movies of the '70's
Found footage
But not at all

Why other memories?
I am not the center of the universe
Just maybe not now
I have to work on myself, you know?
Well, I don't know
The social areas are so easily categorized
We never thought of being part of an ideology

From a generation that saw art and politics as the same thing
Personal story made public
Outdated technologies
Re-enactment
Short Holiday

History, then
The main protagonist is gone
A copy of the copy

Win some, lose others
Industrial utopias
Dramatic Modernization
Electro-Power Station

Passivist thinking
Automatic people want automatic equipment...