

## THE ART OF LISTENING

by Freek Duinhof, on What You See Festival 2019

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She stands in a brightly lit room with white walls. On a wooden floor there is a carpet, bright red and square, and on it is she, her pregnant belly embraced by a dark blue velvet dress. Behind her, a soldier is projected onto the back wall, standing in the same position as she, both legs firm on the ground and with both hands holding a rifle. He is aiming at something. But she doesn't have a rifle, and he is not expecting. They join in a dance of positions, that takes them from a soldier sitting at a camp fire to a flagbearer standing at the frontline, framed by the smoke of explosions. We hear that the men in the line of the unborn child's father all share a fascination for war, some even having fought in one, and that each was given toys that symbolised battle. She wonders if her son will also feel this urge. When the scene ends, the audience has questions. So you are trying to change history, someone asks. Women, as mothers, can be held accountable for continuing this stereotype, right, another tries.

This past November the second edition of *What You See Festival* took place in Utrecht, an art festival with an emphasis on theatre and dance that focusses on gender and identity. In one day we are able to attend a symposium with inspiring speakers and just as inspiring conversations, as well as watch a dance performance that turns all conventions on its head (*Graces* by Silvia Gribaudo in Theater Kikker). The festival tells a lot of stories of people who are found just outside the comfortable little box of the white, heterosexual, cisgendered male, but that same white, heterosexual, cisgendered male is also at times its subject. For example, Franziska Menge wondered in her research mentioned above where that strange fascination for soldiers comes from, that soldier that is so often white, heterosexual, cisgendered and male as well. At the same time, however, the question comes up: where is this man? I have spoken to a lot of people, but without asking anyone to explain their labels to me (could you imagine such a thing), I still have a hunch that only a few, if any, white, heterosexual, cisgendered men were present. (That is, I think there was at least one. Was it *him*? Did I talk to *him*?) He is conspicuous in his absence, but, to be fair, is he even part of this festival's demographic? On the one hand, you'd think so, as gender and identity are relevant to all. You'd especially invite those people that are less likely to join in the conversation. On the other hand, it means complex and beautiful conversations start within the community. Without the other person there, there is a sort of *safe space*, that is eagerly made use of.

For now, I'll direct my attention to the two elements of the festival that centre around question and conversation: the symposium and the programme called *Research*. During the symposium, moderated by model, columnist and DJ Valentijn de Hingh, visual artists, theatre makers, film directors and writers present fragments and images of their work, both finished and unfinished. During this symposium, we could listen to biologist and writer Mariken Heitman reading a few excerpts from her debut novel *De Wateraap (The Aquatic Ape)*. In this novel, a biology student searches for a missing link between apes and humans, and simultaneously, feeling so different from the others, she looks for closeness and a form of identity. In the selected fragments we could hear about different forms of presenting oneself to the outside world. For example, Mariken wrote about how the red lipstick that so many women wear is a way of subconsciously displaying sexual willingness. Red lips are signs of increased circulation, which apparently happens after an orgasm. Ironically, when trying to read more about this phenomenon I had to dig through a few articles like "Here's why he thinks red lips are pretty" and "Red is confident". Mariken then chose a few pages from her upcoming and yet unfinished novel, in which she focuses on the phenomenon of shame.

More specifically that people can be “shamed into a label”. The qualities of different people vary greatly, yet sometimes we don’t allow each other to be too different. One excerpt addressed looking androgynous and the confusion that can come from that. During a date the narrator apparently doesn’t come across as a real woman, or like a *woman*. The narrator reacts with: “But I’m sensitive and I don’t like cars.” Because what are we even talking about? The absurd situations that were presented in a describing language were granted a wonderful nonchalance in the voice of Mariken.

In the following conversation Valentijn asked Mariken to elaborate on the confusion that so often occurs in the conversations about gender identities, other than “male” and “female”. Mariken strikingly said that the binary divide that is now up for debate is constantly defended with a biological argument. Evolutionarily speaking, man and woman were clearly meant to come together and reproduce, right? Mariken thought this was nonsense, for all over the natural world we can see grey areas. Furthermore, one person cannot be more biological than another. Man is part of nature, we are not disconnected from it. Man being separated from nature, of even above it, is indeed an arrogant concept stemming from a myth of progression. We are one of the weights in the universal scale that dips and rises again. We do not have the right to think we know better than nature itself, because we don’t. We can only embark on our own journeys, and criticising another for doing the same is not productive.

### **IT TAKES TWO TO TALK**

Valentijn also spoke of her own identity as well as her transition. Her transition could be seen by the public a few years back, in the film *Valentijn* (directed by Hetty Nietsch). She spoke of how during her transition she found out about the possibility of being “non-binary” and how that seemed to fit her best. Suddenly labels were no longer interesting, worse still: they were restrictions, limitations. She posed the question whether we could imagine a life without labels. Can an identity be limitless? It sounds all too simple, but simply being yourself when that means not according with the so-called ideal is an activist and political act in itself. On top of that, not carrying out that ideal will lead to you being the first of your kind in a lot of places. I’ll use my own story as an example. As a boy who was attracted to other boys, during my time in secondary school in Zeeland (the rural south of the Netherlands) I was a zebra in a field of horses. Involuntarily I became a poster child for the homosexuals, and as a result I was bombarded by a cacophony of sparsely nuanced questions, remarks and exclamations. For a lot of people this is a very real and sometimes even hurtful part of our current society. For those who are closer to the beforementioned so-called ideal, this is an invisible problem. And that, bluntly said, is what privilege entails in these conversation: this problem simply is not your problem.

To elaborate on the difficulty of trying to think outside of the constructed boxes, I would like to mention a discussion that arose later that day with film director Jessica Vilerius (known for her work on Marc Dutroux) and photographer Marvel Harris. Upon viewing parts of the film *Alles is Nu* (*Everything is Now*) we could see in which instances transitioning was hard for Marvel, and in which instances it was no issue whatsoever. We saw his parents as well, and what it was like for them to see their child go through that. During the talk that was held in response to this documentary, it struck me that Jessica referred to Marvel’s journey as a transition from woman to man, while in the film Marvel presented himself as non-binary. For me, this is a remarkable moment in the conversation, because, even in the closeness that was evident between Jessica and Marvel, this lack of care sends the message that nuance is not important. This is precisely an important dynamic in the daily movements of a lot of people. Not wanting to really listen to a name and thus pronouncing it incorrectly as well as not understanding someone and trying to mould them into a

shape that accords with your view of the world are two examples of ways in which you consciously, but more often unconsciously, place your idea of the world above that of another person. It is essential that we address the small relations in hierarchy and thought and action because they support the grander social and cultural inequality. Please not that I am not debating the intention, but the act; this is an important distinction. Between the sending and receiving of messages semantic mistakes can be made on both sides. We must be conscious of this.

So what is it like for someone like Marvel, or someone like Valentijn for that matter, to publicly display their private lives like this? To some extent, telling personal stories is entertaining. With a film they presented an intimate inner journey to the masses. Up to a certain point showing others your journey, no matter how far you go, is a good idea, because you are visible to those who are like you while informing those who are less familiar with your situation. However, those inquiries tend to cross the line into shameless digging. After all, a fly is designed to stay shut till the person wearing the trousers decides to open it. So why do some people insist on asking questions about what is behind said fly? What is the way to show someone that you think their feelings and their way of presenting to the world are normal? Is it about actually accepting them? Do you dare to not receive the answers? Or is the other person obliged to adjust to you? One question should always precede the one you want answered. "Is it okay if I ask you this?" And then truly listen.

I wonder if we are all guilty of thinking that our own point of view is the normal one, and whether that is something we can be blamed for. We can only see the world through our own eyes, but how does this influence the discussion? In some ways we are doing much better than before when it comes to emancipation and accepting others. After all, we are talking about issues now that we absolutely could not mention mere decades ago (depending on the topic, perhaps only years). Simultaneously, we are living in a time when everyone has a voice that can be heard – and read – by others. While this seems like a good thing, *all* thoughts can be heard, and thus all thoughts are archived. Then, if the filter between the thought and the utterance is thin, or even absent, more often than not the outcome is not brilliant. An emotion is expressed directly and words are not considered, subsequently haunting us and them. In my opinion this is also at the core of the now well-known phrase: "I am not allowed to say anything anymore!" What does this mean precisely? During the symposium Mariken Heitman clarifyingly said that us humans use a discourse and that this discourse is what we call reality. We name everything and we categorise everything, and this is how the world turns. If this discourse then is challenged by someone who is derogated by it, apparently reality is changed forever. That is confusing, I get that. But to slightly paraphrase the words of renowned Argentinian family therapist Salvador Minuchin: "If you are confused, cherish your confusion." Nowadays, admitting that you were wrong is something of an art, but you will grow more and faster if you do. By asking a question you admit to not knowing, and in doing so you are making a brave attempt to continue that conversation.

## **TODAY'S FICTION**

Today, the Dutch public debate revolves around the theme of change. We are discussing the climate, but also the value of a tradition that turned out to be harmful, as well as the path to equal rights between men and women at work. Within the festival's context we found a lot of room for discussions on intersectionality: the idea that people experience discrimination and oppression because of a plethora of aspects like sex, skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and physical and mental health and ability. Moreover, it is the idea that discrimination because of one of these aspects cannot be separated from another aspect. In order to connect this to the idea of tradition, I would like to mention Ira Kip's presentation. During the symposium she, together with actors Yahaira Gezius and Smita James, showed scenes from her production *Shrew Her*, an

adaptation of William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. By performing a piece that is known for being misogynistic (and that's formulated mildly) with female and queer actors from different backgrounds, with different identities and different orientations, Ira challenges the play from the beginning. What do this text and its traditions mean to this group of artists, as well as the audience? According to Ira, *Shrew Her* was a research involving Shakespeare and the personal stories of the performers. By performing this piece today and with these specific actors, a question can be asked: do Shakespeare's writings accord with our reality? Is this still okay? Devika Partiman, founder of the *Stem op een vrouw* campaign (*Vote for a woman*), commented after the presentation that putting the canon into question and challenging it are smart and interesting strategies to take. It's compelling to have a black director work with a well-known, so-called untouchable text. A great remark during the discussion that followed was that we mustn't forget the context within which it was written. After all, Shakespeare was just a poor writer who made theatre from his own perspective in a time totally different from our own. A fiction is not separate from the reality from which it was born. Precisely this idea was central in the presentations of that weekend. The conversation leads to theater, and theatre leads to conversation.

This conversation was continued during the *Research*, for instance with Simon(e) van Baarloos and Rahel Barra's presentation. We entered a space and saw two performers with female looking bodies, both blonde and about the same height. They presented their bodies, wearing nothing but sports shorts and walking as though they were bodybuilders that could not stop flexing every single muscle in their bodies. They huffed, they did push-ups, they covered themselves in olive oil and they ate raw eggs. A raw egg is, of course, a source of protein for the athlete, yet simultaneously it is a symbol of new life and fertility. Interestingly enough, these two female looking performers were expressing male roles quite casually, whereas the theatre has an age-old tradition of men playing all the parts, whether it be for reasons of purity, religion or ridicule. Donna Chittick, then, showed a part of her coming choreography *Together* in a different hall. We watched as four women danced, initially moving in a hyperfeminine and sensual way, soft and round. The movements then quite naturally progressed into voguing and waacking, and became more and more powerful and sharper, more *urban* and masculine. Slowly I caught myself in this train of thought. Who owns what form of dance? Peggy Ollislaegers, dance dramaturg and dance activist, briefly remarked that almost all forms in urban dance were created for men by men, and that even the more 'feminine' waacking was formed by gay men. For instance, K.R.U.M.P., which stands for "Kingdom, Radically uplifted Mighty Praise", is all about celebrating oneself and lifting the male body. She suggested that one could research the female body making these K.R.U.M.P. movements and what meanings that would convey. Peggy then stated that urban dance languages are relatively put into question more often than other contemporary dance languages. What does this say about the power relations? Why is form so often scrutinized (with minimal prior knowledge), resulting in a denial of content?

### **WE'VE ALWAYS BEEN HERE**

A second *wakeup call* arrived in the form of a remark made by Simon(e), who joined the group after her own presentation to see the other works. "Let's focus less on masculinity and femininity." So what does context do for the audience and the conversation? For me, the word *gender* was dominant in experiencing the festival, guiding my observations down a certain path. Yet, there were many other aspects that were of importance to the works and their reception. Up to this point, Donna Chittick has lived a life vastly different from mine, and that is something to be celebrated. For difference is a teacher. Furthermore, one person's experience is not another's responsibility; I cannot tell you how to feel and act. That is up to you. I find that, during the festival, I was looking for something and that I ended up finding much more. The artists presented their

works and therefore themselves. And yet, the recognition that I noticed within myself still came as a surprise. Why? Why is it not logical to me that the black woman standing in front of me is in need of the same space as me, a white gay man? I realise once more that my experiences in life are not hers. Why do I not talk to her more? While writing this text I caught myself getting steadily more angry. A lot of my past was safely tucked away, but I had run into it again at the festival. This meant that I was sharing pages and pages of angry and melancholic memories. If you've been yelled at from across the street, if you're no longer in touch with part of your family, if you've been threatened, if your opinion has been disregarded, if you've been told that you are overreacting; sometimes it'll just be too much. These are things that have happened only to me, and there's much more than that as well. This bag of events that I drag along becomes a bit lighter when I talk about what happened, because naturally I am not the only one. However, my experiences also cause me to have a problem with a word that a lot of Dutch people are proud of: tolerance. In fact, tolerance means something entirely different from what is often thought. One only tolerates something that is found to be negative or even repulsive.

Tolerance is but a scale with which to measure the range one can afford to differ before the difference becomes too great. During a great conversation someone once said that we can tolerate the rain, but not people. Devika Partiman fired off multiple one-liners to the audience (and him too, I would believe) when she said: "Support those that are already here, but don't call that development of talent. The talented people are already here." She then turned to those talented people: "If there is no seat at the table, then there is someone in your seat." The nonchalance with which Devika spoke is the second thing I was looking for, both within myself and in conversation. This is the same nonchalance with which Mariken dryly responds to an insult that she does not like cars. The relaxed way in which Simon(e) and Rahel strain their bodies, or the open questioning that Ira and her performers use when working with Shakespeare, or the smile that Marvel and Valentijn show when saying that they are simply not interested in labelling themselves. In my opinion this nonchalance is also what marks the growth of the festival since its previous edition. The first year there was something in the air, an urge to solve a great problem. This second year we see a range of stories that burst with glitter here and sawdust there, sometimes brightly coloured and different times in pastels. The most frequently asked question during the festival then would seem if we could just listen to what was being said. And that's brilliant.