

Some paths through It is part XVIII and I'm here to be part of the assembly, and this assembly is no longer necessarily ceremonial

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1A. *I'm here to be part of the assembly*

Artists Jochem van Laarhoven and Bas van den Hurk have enjoyed a collaborative partnership for several years now. In 2018, the duo met Bo Stokkermans, who subsequently participated in their 2019 exhibit *Support Structures*. This collaboration was the genesis for the trio's decision to complete a joint residency at De Fabriek, an artist-run initiative in Eindhoven. *It is part XVIII and I'm here to be part of the assembly, and this assembly is no longer necessarily ceremonial* — the title of the work they produced while at De Fabriek — signals the union of the three artists as it represents a minor change to the serial title Van Laarhoven and Van den Hurk had previously used for their work: *It is part [x] of an ensemble, and this ensemble is no longer necessarily ceremonial*. Stokkermans, as announced, is now here to be part of the ensemble, which transformed into an 'assembly' during the residency.

Starting with the title of the trio's work may not be the most obvious choice. A title, literally the naming of something, often has a delimiting function. Even when a title refuses to provide the viewer with any additional information, like the many *Untitled* pieces found in modernism, it still ensures that the work is framed: *this work*, made at this time by such and such artist. Whereas, if an encompassing 'framework' for the individual and shared practices of Stokkermans, Van Laarhoven and Van den Hurk does indeed exist, it is the unceasing attempt to avoid, interrogate or disrupt established frameworks. And yet, despite the contradiction of this gesture in relation to the work, I still want to begin by focussing on the title. What's more, the title, though broken down into its constituent words and fragments, will serve as the guiding principle for this text.

1B. *assembly*

The initial plan for their residency at De Fabriek, was to research forms of communal living and working. The idea was to cohabitate during the working period and to let the work develop out of this. The term 'assembly' is appropriate in this respect: the most common definition refers to a group of people who congregate in pursuit of a common goal. The assembly of citizens (the *ekklesia*) was the very foundation of the democratic city-states of ancient Greece and historically has a broad meaning in both political and legislative contexts – from the fight for the right to associate to the 'national assembly' whose origins lie in the French Revolution. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt use the word assembly to "grasp the power of coming together and acting politically in concert".¹ 'Assembly', however, also

¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly*, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. xxi.

refers more generally to ‘come together’ or ‘put together’ in the sense of ‘to assemble’, the meaning it took on at the dawn of the twentieth century when the ‘assembly line’ became the backbone of industrialized production.

The convergence found in the word ‘assembly’ between people assembling and the assembling of objects is characteristic of the work the artists created at De Fabriek. Not only did Stokkermans, Van Laarhoven and Van den Hurk convene at this location, but they also created a space in which objects, ideas, theories, friends and other visitors were brought together in ever-changing constellations. Visitors, for instance, were invited to join in the painting or drawing; the artists read through texts together and filmed and photographed one another; while silk-screened images (inter alia, from the texts they read) drawings, objects and paintings, as if in a continuously moving composition, were endlessly juxtaposed, shifted, changed, piled, cleared away or re-used in new objects. In an attempt to radically open themselves and the material to one another as well as to the influence of external visitors, ideas or theories, the process-based quality of forging connections, of relationships, becomes the basis for a continuously moving, organic *gesamtkunstwerk* (in the broadest sense of the word). In other words, the work could be considered as a dynamic field of relationships that unfold both materially and immaterially. The concept of resonance figures significantly here: people, voices, images and ideas echo forth in one another and continue, whether or not just below the surface, to play a formative role. One thing leads to another without any comprehensible or observable cause-effect relationship that can, much less needs, to be identified. A specific image lingers and leaves its traces in a new form or an encounter or conversation inscribes itself in the material. The final installation is but a condensed selection of everything the artists created in De Fabriek. However, like coagulated sediment, it contains an entire history of actions, ideas and connections.

One consequence of this wide-ranging notion of ‘working together’ and ‘bringing together’ is that, strictly speaking, it is virtually impossible to identify the author(s) of *Part XVIII* (despite the fact that I am writing about the work of Stokkermans, Van Laarhoven and Van den Hurk). This is due, in part, simply to the fact that a significant portion of the work was made by multiple people. But this de-individualisation also forms a more *structural* condition of the work, given that the material harbours an immeasurable multitude of voices and ideas. In this respect, the connotation of the word ‘assembly’ with the industrial ‘assembly line’, also becomes significant in a different respect.

The conveyor belt has to be one of the most expressive symbols of the de-subjectification of labour. Socio-historically, this Fordist organisation of production introduced extreme forms of alienation. But more broadly, the radical abolition of individualism, in forms of cooperation and collectivity, historically also played a central emancipatory role in socialist and communist movements.² As such, a critique and undermining of individual authorship, frequently accompanied by the ‘de-skilling’ of the

² While a capitalist, industrial society produced alienated and fragmented subjects, Karl Marx argued, a communist society would be organized collectively. However, Marx’ vision of communism must not be taken, as more simplistic readings sometimes seem to suggest, as an ideology that neglects or subsumes the individual within the community. On the contrary: the community is the precondition for self-realisation. “In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Communist Manifest*, 1848, p. 27).

artist, was also used by avant-garde and neo avant-garde artwork. Alexander Rodchenko, for example, attempted to make painting more egalitarian by using only primary colours in his abstract monochromatic canvases. That normally disapproving platitude: ‘My five-year-old son/daughter could make this’ was the actual objective. Everyone should be able to make art. In a similar manner, critical postmodernism demonstrated that the emphasis on individual authorship was part and parcel of the ideology of capitalism, in which individualism and competition are systematically prioritised over collectivity and solidarity. While more directly concerning the field of art, it was emphasised that the signature of the individual artist plays an essential role in the value mechanisms of the art market.

One method that Stokkermans, Van Laarhoven and Van den Hurk repeatedly employed during their residency was to pass out A4s, pre-printed or otherwise, and to continue working on them until someone decides the A4 is ‘ready’. By developing a collective series of works as if they were produced on a conveyor belt, this approach explicitly questions the notion of authorship. The resultant material is subsequently subjected to a selection process in a similarly associative — almost automated — manner. ‘Yes/No/Maybe’ sessions were held with all who visited, where it was intuitively decided whether the work was finished, rejected, or as a ‘maybe’ to be placed back into rotation.

On the one hand, unforeseen and novel associative connections and compositions emerge during the process, which would not have been possible to conceive individually or rationally (this was in fact also vital for the artistic strategy of *assemblage*, which is not, coincidentally, a derivative of ‘assembly’). On the other hand, in this method of free association latent structures also manifest themselves. Sigmund Freud viewed free association as a way to break away from the limits of rational thinking and the self-censorship that it engenders (the Surrealists explicitly relied on Freud’s theories in strategies like *écriture automatique*). In the spontaneity of free association, the stable, conventional order of meaning is replaced by an open-ended structure of thinking and experience that can lay bare something intrinsic about the patient. Central to psychoanalysis is the idea that latent (i.e. repressed) patterns and pathologies determine the subject’s external behaviours. The psychoanalyst could discover these in the dreams, associations and ‘Freudian slips’ of his or her patient. Put simply, a moment of ‘freedom’ takes shape (the lifting of self-censure) that reveals the patient’s underlying and invisible conditioning. This is also how we can understand the A4s of Stokkermans, Van Laarhoven and Van den Hurk. Not only does the work realise a moment of free creation or the total abolition of authorship, it also exhibits the residues of individual style or taste and the unmistakable influence of the history of modern art that impacts the formal language and conceptual order in which the work can be understood.

2A. *and this assembly is no longer necessarily ceremonial*

In ‘Zonder Richtlijn’ (‘Ohne Leitbild’, 1967), German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno suggests a similar dynamic in art. Adorno was firmly opposed to the idea of normative guidelines. The longing for a *Leitbild*, literally a ‘guiding image’ – i.e. a desire for universal norms and values – is symptomatic of the modern, post-war experience of chaos and disintegration. ‘The demand for aesthetic norms and guidelines arises when that which is

allowed or forbidden is no longer more or less indisputable'.³ As such, the attempt to develop universal norms or guidelines is by itself regressive, representing the desire to reach back to an idealised past rather than trying to understand one's own historical moment. Norms and values – both in aesthetics and ethics – are always linked to a specific historical, social and political situation. In order to gain acceptance, they are presented as universally true. But once specific norms and values no longer suit the spirit of the times, they become abstract conventions that only have an oppressive effect. The phrase 'This assembly is no longer necessarily ceremonial' carries the same contradiction that was central for Adorno. A ceremony is conventional; it is an artificial, constructed ritual that simultaneously appeals to an often religious or mythical 'higher' form of truth, seemingly predicated on an endless history. Ceremonies remain unchanged, after all, because 'this is how it has always been done'. Once something is no longer 'ceremonial', no longer part of the conventional circuit, one could say, its constructed nature becomes all the more visible. Walter Benjamin, Adorno's mentor and lifelong interlocutor, argued that precisely in the obsolete or in the ruin, in the things that have lost their functional self-evidence, we can recognize the lost myths and promises that these objects once embodied.

For Adorno, the main point is to identify which naturalised rules and conventions, which *Leitbilder*, determine how we think and act. Instead of pursuing guidelines, art should seek to reveal and disrupt them. Art that only produces an act of recognition, for example in standardised, harmonious melodies based on established conventions, seemingly may provide pleasure or satisfaction. However, according to Adorno, this kind of art effectively allows the viewer to conform to established conventions, inattentive to variations or unclassifiable elements. It is only in that which seems 'out of place' (the dissonant), in the unexpected and experimental, – in that which we are unable to interpret or conceptualize – that a moment of truth can appear: an instance in which the repressive, false semblance of harmony, of naturalised or universally proposed guidelines, is laid bare. Put in another way, an aesthetic moment of spontaneity or 'freedom' can demonstrate something about our lack of freedom.

Adorno's essay took on a significant role during the artists' residency. The dialectical tension Adorno expresses between autonomy and heteronomy is a central aspect of the work of each of the artists. Midway through their working period, the idea of guidelines unexpectedly received a new impetus when De Fabriek, along with all the other arts organisations, was forced to close its doors on account of the coronavirus. Suddenly, society was quite literally defined by guidelines. Guidelines that impeded precisely the ability to join one another and collaborate.

2B. *no longer ceremonial*

Stokkermans' works is characterized by the performative dissection, interrogation and deconstruction of social conventions. By establishing explicit, artificial living regimes and conditions for himself, Stokkermans prompts situations in which the customs and categorisations that we are normally unaware of are exaggerated and displayed. Stokkermans

³ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Zonder Richtlijnen', in Theodor W. Adorno, *Zonder richtlijnen: Parva aesthetica*, Octavo, 2010, pp 7-18, p. 8.

transforms his life into *form* to such an extent that he becomes a mirror for the formalities of everyday life. The large stone blocks that he brought to De Fabriek from a prior work appear to allegorically allude to the paradoxical inversion between consolidation and fluidity that Stokkermans time and again manifests in his work. Stone symbolizes immutability: things that are ‘fixed’ are ‘solid as a rock’ or ‘carved in stone’. But in the work of Stokkermans, the stone blocks continuously change form and function to adapt to the needs of the situation and the artist. While Stokkermans moulds his life and activities into concrete forms, the contours of his environment gradually fluidify so as to shape themselves around the artist.

Van Laarhoven and Van den Hurk focus on modernist-inspired research into the conventions and boundaries of the visual arts, specifically photography (Van Laarhoven) and painting (Van den Hurk) and how the visual arts relate to theatre. In ongoing collaborations with theatre collective Lars Doberman, elements from sets, scenery and costumes are transformed into visual installations. On the other hand, silk-screened sheets are put together into suits that, caressed by the wind, seem to float through the space as actors. In the reciprocal exploration and intermingling of theatre and the visual arts, we can see the different perspectives and ways of looking that both forms require. For instance, the large space of De Fabriek, where objects and drawings are spread out, invites one to adopt a more dispersed gaze and spurs the visitor to wander at will through the spatial installation without allowing for a complete overview. It is a gaze that slowly forms a path through the material. This changes substantially when works are held up vertically, one by one, as they were in the film shot by Stokkermans, Van Laarhoven and Van den Hurk. In the film, the visual artworks almost act as characters, held aloft by an anonymous body. While the screen prints and drawings take on a life of their own, the body increasingly dissolves into the abstract composition of the image.

Van Laarhoven (who filmed the images) prefers to point the video camera downward. This disorienting, low perspective, in which feet are regularly filmed or photographed, mirrors the resistance to the bird’s eye view that also characterizes the horizontal landscape of the installation. The big toe, George Bataille once wrote, anatomically speaking differentiates man from animals. The development of this tiny body part was the last evolutionary step that changed us from hominids, still part-time tree dwellers, to vertical bipeds. Despite this, the toe — the foot in general — is considered lowly and unclean, something that stands in the mud. The toe is literally the foundation for man's erect posture, yet it is hierarchically separated, being concealed and neglected, from the elevated head: the site of spiritual and intellectual exaltation.⁴ In *Part XVIII*, the foot makes its way through the material, while the work expands in a rhizomatic, horizontal fashion rather than taking on determinate forms. A silkscreened reproduction of a small image from *The Tears of Eros*, Bataille’s final work, appears in various places. It is a primitive fertility figurine, an amorphous form in which, as one of the artists remarks, you can also see a dog... or perhaps a face? The work produced during the De Fabriek residency refers to theoretically and aesthetically complex concepts, ideas and issues. However, as a chain of associative resonances, it refuses to culminate into a single, unambiguous perspective.

⁴ Georges Bataille, ‘The Big Toe’ (1929), in Georges Bataille en Allan Stoekl (red.), *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, University of Minnesota Press, 1985, pp. 20-23.

3. *It is Part XVIII*

A title, as I began this text, often has a delimiting function. A number, a mathematical unit, may well be exemplary of exact classification. But when the number is part of a series, it annihilates its own delimiting function. That is to say that the number, in itself specific and defined, is a part of an endless chain. In other words, the part (in this case, *Part XVIII*) may refer to a specific constellation of time, place and material, but indirectly it also refers to a limitless future. In the case of this text, it is then perhaps not the title that *captures* the work, but rather, as an ensemble of words, forms the starting point for a multitude of paths that lead us through it.

Bio:

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