

THE LIMA COLLECTION: PERFORMANCE

May 25, 2016, Curated by Frédérique Bergholtz and Susan Gibb of If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution.

For the third time, the ladies of If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution were invited as curators to reflect on the theme of performance within the realm of media art and the LIMA collection. If I can't Dance is an institution that 'produces art works and thematic programmes and is exploring the evolution and typology of performance and performativity in contemporary art'.¹ Performance is a recurrent theme in media art which is not fixed to a certain medium or paradigm; different interpretations and connections have been made. The body, the object, the camera, the act: performance and media art are closely linked. The two disciplines react on each other and feed each other.

Through the past years of collaborating with Bergholtz and Gibb, they got to know the collection better and better. This year they came up with a conceptual approach for the screening. Starting from performance theory, they analysed and presented works from the LIMA collection in which the performative plays an important role. The screening was titled 'Performance: thinking through Event and Duration' and first showed four works from the 1970's, which are called 'durational pieces': Ulrike Rosenbach's 'Sorry Mister' (1974), Sef Peeters' 'The 61 Hours in de Appel Band II' (1976), Abramović / Ulay's 'Incision' (1978) and Allan Kaprow's 'Then' (1974). They showed the works consecutively to emphasise the duration of the pieces, apart as well as together as a whole, and to see what its effect on the audience would be.

The aspect of duration indeed became tangible for the audience. The pace of the works is very different from what we are used to nowadays - with high tempo montages and images that last for only seconds. In these works the 'real time' of the initial event was felt and by watching the work the same timeframe was experienced by this new audience. When viewing 'Sorry Mister' by Ulrike Rosenbach, the tension the work evokes by its viewers was clear. Utterances like 'aahh' en 'oiii' were heard, and the ongoing self-torture that was portrayed on screen was making the viewers uncomfortable and restless in their seats.

This kind of affect was evoked by all the following works. They are all in one way or the other an endurance of a physical challenge.

By screening the works in a fixed cinema-setting (and not in a museum where one can walk around freely) the audience is (more) indebted to sit through the whole piece, which makes for a very different experience. Maybe it is more challenging for the audience, but for sure it is more intense since you can not escape - just like the artists themselves.

¹ See <http://www.ificantdance.org/About/00-IfICantDance>

Subsequently to this block of four works the screening of an interview with artist Chris Burden conducted by Alexis Smith was shown. Recorded in Italy in 1975, the interview sees Burden and Smith (who appeared alongside him in many of his performances) reflecting on examples of his early performance works, describing the reactions of the audience, and indicating a movement away from the life threatening performance with which Burden made his name. This film partially gave an insight into what it is like to do a performance, and what motivates one to do such a thing. It was too an educational work, to hear a master's opinion on the art of performance.

The evening ended with an elaborate interview with artist Sef Peeters, whose work 'The 61 Hours in de Appel band II' was screened earlier. In the seventies, Sef Peeters (Venlo, 1947) was very active in the field of performance and video art. His early years coincided with those of de Appel arts centre in Amsterdam which at the time presented 'performance, environment and situation art'. Like most of Peeters' work from that time, the screened work is of personal and physical nature. It is the registration of normal activities of the body. Breathing, blinking, and making noises. It is the ultimate proof that someone was actually present in a place, who left behind traces and, through physical activity, transformed the space into what it is.

Frédérique Bergholtz was curious about the work that was screened, his further career, the aspect of time in his work and the relation between art and life. Peeters elaborated on the context of his performance at the Appel and the video work that this experience produced. It was the one-year anniversary of de Appel and they organised a week of specifically Dutch performance artists. At the time, performance was a new genre in art and it were mostly international artists that had performed at de Appel. With this exhibition, Peeters was invited and three days before the opening he went there to live in the space - in a very modest manner. He created a sort of workspace, like an atelier, documenting his experience through improvisation with the camera. This resulted in a very intimate, close to the skin portrait of the artist and his experience of this specific time and place. It is the body, the camera, the space that matters in this performance. It is not about the after-image of the video.

At the time however, the work was also criticised for being too personal. One wondered whether this was art. Peeters argues, when looking back forty years later, that the border between public and private has shifted a lot; nowadays our lives are much more public because of internet and the use of social media. Some of it is voluntary and some of it is involuntary - but still, much more is known about us by the public than it was back then. Nevertheless Peeters understands why the question was asked. He remembers that as a young artist the boundaries between art(work) and life were rather blurry.

Bergholtz goes into this relation between art and life; how do these two aspects coexist in his life? Peeters explains that indeed when he was younger the boundaries between living and making art were quite vague. The two aspects were very much interconnected. He recalls somebody asking him, after doing (another) performance at the Appel, if this was some kind of therapy. Nowadays it is more clear to him what belongs where, and he can make more conscious decision how to let things work together - because in the end, they are inseparable.

Peeters made a series of works on the topic that evolved around art and life called 'Practice of Living' series I, II and III.² He always experiences friction between his art practice and his life, and thinks every artist must feel this friction. It is part of this way of life, and the friction makes for interesting questions and artworks. At some point in his career Peeters decided to focus on his teaching job, and gave up working in his studio. But even then he says, he couldn't help himself making a little artist statement about that; he published an ad in Metropolis M (an established art magazine) which said 'The Artist is Resting'. So even then he had the need to express the choices of his personal life; even while he was resting as an artist, he could not stop making art.

The audience was invited to ask questions and a contributor came back to the screened video work. Did he, in retrospect or at the time, think of it as too private or not. Peeters thinks when taking a step back out of the momentum - even only a few moments later - the art piece has become already less private. There is already taken a step back. He emphasised he thinks times have changed so much. However, the border of what is private or public is never fixed, and changes over time and place. This border is exactly what is interesting because it is characteristic of the morals of a specific time. When an artist challenges or questions these borders it is - at the time - always a provocation. This is what makes interesting art.

Once somebody told Peeters you will only have a real conversation when you reveal something vulnerable of yourself. This is probably something private, something you do not necessarily other people want to see. This is when you truly connect and the conversation becomes alive. But therefore you have to overcome the general conventions of what you should talk about when having a conversation. There is a significant difference in *telling* something private and *being* private. It is the same thing with (making) art. The moment counts in which you choose to push boundaries and create something new; making a new connection. Generality is not grounded in connectivity, therefore one has to reach out and be vulnerable in order to find connection when meeting the other.

The public/private border is changing from time to time, and so the context of artworks changes. Performance art was very different when it emerged in the early 1960s. It was a new form of art and a new realm was being explored. Back then it was perceived as quiet intense and heavy. Nowadays we often feel like we have already seen it, and there is little left that is perceived as shocking.

Report by Hilde van den Dobbelsteen

² See the series on Sef Peeters website <http://www.sefpeeters.nl/werk/practice-of-living>