

Interview De Geuzen – rhizome [Nat Muller] – Friday 24.01.2003

- 1. De Geuzen describe themselves as “a foundation for multi-visual research”. Could you elaborate what the “multi”, the “visual” and the “research” components means in your practice, and which strategies for collaboration you use to make all these things stick together?**

We've often talked about multi-visual research as the equivalent of, "there's more than one way to skin a cat" or "there are many roads to Rome". And that pretty much encompasses our approach. Depending on the nature of the project, we employ different visual strategies to engage our audience in issues we're interested in exploring. When looking back at what we've been doing over the past 7 years, certain thematic strands have emerged such as female identity or tactics for claiming space and place. In relation to these ideas, our projects are sort of temporary conclusions, public moments in an ongoing process. And therefore, the border between projects is always hazy, as one always feeds into another. Through finding multiple contexts and forms to deal with these issues, we've made a body of work which together can be seen as multi-visual research. And one thing for sure, our research is never direct or head on. We're always circumscribing a set of concerns, satelliting around them in order to gain different perspectives. In calling it “research” we wanted to move out of the object model of artmaking. After all, research happens in a continuum. And most of all, its open-ended structure honoured our Achilles heel; we're really the worst at finishing anything [laughter].

And in practice, the multi-visual element means many things, for instance, when we wanted to look at the work of Michel de Certeau we brought the audience in by preparing a meal. We filled our space with round tables and made layers of table coverings printed with different De Certeau quotes. With the start of each course, a layer was removed revealing another quote. Speakers delivered talks from within the audience and we took on the role of waitresses, refilling glasses and taking away plates. For us, hosting a meal felt near to De Certeau's ideas on play and tactics of resistance in the practice of everyday life. Also, the form offered a means of circumventing conventional modes of programming where the "expert" pontificates from a podium. Other projects are simpler in their visualisation, almost iconic in how they operate. For example, the De Geuzen Uniform series where we work from our own bodies mapping identities, or the Democracy doormat designed for the entrance of the Royal College gallery, or better yet, the sticker made in collaboration with the Rode Draad (the Amsterdam based prostitutes' union). In the latter case, we were able to design a sticker fulfilling a practical need. They wanted a "no pictures" emblem for their windows and we developed a solidarity on the peel away backing proclaiming, "Our image is our own". Returning to the idea of threading, you can see the sticker, the online paper dolls, or *Unravelling Histories* as being connected. Each offers insight into female identity but each situates itself in a unique context. Basically, the longer we work, the richer our multi-visual research feels, because we can draw from different experiences and methodologies.

2. You have often organised events, which facilitate a certain exchange (workshops, meetings, dinners, residencies) – of knowledge, of discourse, collecting...how do you position that role of a facilitator within the current art world, and also within your practice?

Facilitation is a double edged sword which sometimes works for us and other times not. In some ways people perceive us as a foundation of women who set out the doilies for the cakes so that the real stuff can begin. They don't realise that the doilies and the cakes are actually a big part of the content, and that it's quite a conscious strategy on our part. These acts of hospitality are a means of opening up exchange, they are about setting the stage or striking a tone. And the more we work, the more we are able to exploit facilitation as a strategy. We've had experiences where it fell out of balance; we felt like doormats rather than collaborators [laughter]. With our failures we were invisible hosts, we were unable to make the flip of initiating a dialogue through hospitality. In other words, hospitality serves a function within our projects and when it works, it lowers barriers. Cookies and cakes are not just window dressing, they are a part of the content, a powerful domestic language that most of us are familiar with and respond to. Again, returning to the De Certeau evening, through the meal, the table coverings and the position we took, people were disarmed and could be more playful.

Also, since we moved out of our space we've enjoyed pushing the role of facilitator even more. In leaving "the house", we could become more theatrical. As free agents, we can now PLAY house. [laughter] For instance, in many respects the "Geuzen Uniforms" emerged out of us looking critically at what it means to facilitate, and learning to play with it or camp it up. In the past, people missed the theatricality and saw facilitation as an inevitable female role. But if you turn it into costume you say: I know this is a guise, a role which I can manipulate.

3. There seems to be an obsession with archiving the past few years; whether it's a technical question about digital storage, OR whether it's fin de millennium angst and an articulation of a desire to contain, label, control. The "archive" is something that keeps popping up in your work; whether in your "Temporary archive", in your "Inside the archive", and even in your latest project "Unravelling Histories". What does the archive mean to you in your work?

It's funny you ask this because with "Inside the Archive", we tried to look directly at archiving, meaning researching it as a subject and it didn't really work. Looking at it as a general phenomenon, we tried to answer your question and got hopelessly stuck. We thought if we could bring people together in a lecture series to talk about why archiving is significant, we could discover why it's so important to us. Eventually we saw the subject couldn't be tackled on a meta-level. We came to understand archiving as the result of an impulse. It's what you do when you love things, when you're

fascinated or obsessed by them. And, if you talk about research as a process, archiving is an inevitable consequence. We had to become archivists in order to track our thoughts by mapping out threads within it. Once we let go of the question “what is archiving”, and started examining the various threads, then suddenly the whole thing came alive. We could look at our own work as a collection of thought in which trajectories could be followed, classified and even re-narrated. Also, archiving allows for the unknown. Let's say you're attracted to an image or thought that at first sight appears to be a tangent. You file it away, time passes, other things are brought into the collection and then suddenly that tangent is drawn into the centre of the constellation gaining much more resonance than before. Over time, through the process of collecting, we've been able to discover connections between each other as individuals, between our projects and also between other bodies of thought.

4. Is there a difference between the database and archive?

Yes, if you look at them in terms of tools, spaces and interests. Where the archive is based on the desires and interests of the archivist, the database is a kind of “lege map” (Dutch for an empty file); it is both space and tool waiting to be utilised. With that said, when it comes to shaping content, it's by no means neutral or insignificant. Depending on its design, the database has the capacity to configure information and control the way we navigate through it. And of course, it goes without saying that database is only as interesting as its data.

So is the “Unravelling Histories” project a database or an archive?

It's both. The project began with an interest; we were fascinated by a dress we'd once seen in the Rijksmuseum. What made it so fetching was its surface and its history. Fashioned out of silk RAF parachutist's maps, the garment was made by Jeanne Terwen-de Loos, an art historian who had lived in Indonesia and was interned by the Japanese during WWII. The dress is an incredible object, something that you look at and think "I wish I would have made that." So when we were asked to participate in an exhibition looking at the impact of the VOC (The Dutch East India Company) we seized the opportunity to study it. Using both her biography and the dress as a point of orientation, we expanded our research from there. We wanted to create sort of 'spin off dresses' or replicas which would be shown with the Terwen-de Loos dress in the Amsterdam Historical Museum, and parallel to that, we wanted to gather our research materials and make them available online. Of course as we began collecting we started to see that the online aspect needed to be more than a repository. For us, it was not just about making a data retrieval system but creating a mode of associative narration. So, it was at that stage that we went to Michael Murtaugh and asked him to collaborate with us. We were familiar with other projects he'd done and were impressed with his ability to design digital systems of collecting which afforded a degree of drift and fuzziness. We also knew he would be sensitive to the narrative content, and in the end, he tailored a system to suit our needs.

But also the aesthetics of the database is very tactile, as if you were shuffling cards...

Your right, it is tactile and with each shuffle you can open up a completely new narrative. From the beginning, we wanted *Unravelling Histories* to have the feeling of playing with stacks or piles of visual / textual material. While the replicated dresses are filtered and iconic, the database is a bit messy. In structure, we wanted to retain some of the chaos of our research, while having moments of clarity as well. In a sense, the structure of the database is actually reflective of the way we work in general. It emulates what every collector winds up doing. You lay your wares out, shove stuff here and there and play with the boundless configurations in search of an internal or external logic. And it's precisely in the reshuffle when stories are liberated and the potential of database moves beyond information gathering and becomes exciting.

5. What is the connection between the physical dresses and the online database, both being mediated entities, presenting information in different forms? The dresses somehow give the semblance of a unified whole; the database gives scattered pieces of information: they both tell different narratives.

Yes, they tell different but related narratives and moreover, they speak to audiences in a different way. The databank is a mind journey and its about getting lost, bumping into things or drifting between stories. We could include more fringe elements. For instance, Mrs. Terwen-de Loos's first husband perished in the battle of the Java Sea so we made links to veteran sites listing all the boats that sank during the war. Its actually quite incredible the number of men that died in such a small area. Or we had links to a site that tells you how to distinguish American parachute maps from that of the RAF. We in fact played with the kind of cross-pollination that is only afforded on the net.

But the dresses are more direct and they start from the body. There's something that happens with the garments which is very important to us, a kind of intimacy that can only be had through a physical encounter. After all, that was the first thing that attracted us to the Terwen-de Loos dress. When you stand before it, you immediately measure your own body next to hers. You have a sense of her presence as it retains the imprint of her figure, and also bears the marks of her handy work. It's really a strange sensation, something like standing next to your grandfather's coat or if you think about the power of Joseph Beuys' felt suit. They're like a skin that has been shed, or a trace left behind. You feel a strong presence of someone, even though they're absent.

This is why we were so excited about copying her pattern, and we wondered whether we could re-map the body of this woman without even knowing her. It was really about discovering who this woman was and looking into our own fascination with the dress. And to do that we had to physically remake her pattern, retracing her logic, and steps. But at the same time, we didn't want it to remain nostalgic and the replicas were a means of bringing her world into our world by finding echoes of that colonial history in the now.

Seen together, the relation between the database and the dresses is dialogic. In a way, the latter operate like key threads. There is *The Dress of Mrs. Terwen-de Loos*, plus our three replicas, *The Dress of Here, There and Other Dislocations*, *The Dress of Propriety and Longing* and *The Dress of Faith and Fidelity*. The surface of each tells a different story and filters information accordingly. And to return to your question of tactility, we were surprised to see how people immediately touch the dresses and feel them in order to read what's on them. Fundamentally, this kind of tactility is something running through most of our work whether it's online or analogue.

Unravelling histories: wearing history like a text; how is it inscribed on the body? It is also a corporeal history, worn on the body – but you display it. Is it a conscious strategy to create that distance of not wearing this colonialist history on your own body; of literally distancing

We never considered wearing the dresses because in a way, they are not ours. Each dress is tailored to her body. If we wore the dresses the whole thing would have become like make-believe or a costume. Keeping that distance, there is private quality to the dresses, meaning you are looking at a possession belonging to a specific individual, with particular measurements, living in a set time in history.

6. What is the difference between wearing and showing/displaying?

This is actually something we've thought a lot about, especially in relation to our uniforms. It's interesting because originally our uniforms were made to be worn, especially the blue wool outfits, "Utility and Service". But when we wore them, we saw that they immediately went flat by fulfilling a functional role. They lost their symbolic value. We saw that through distance, we could not only talk about the quirkiness of our individual bodies (which are by the way are quite opposite from each other [laugh]) but we could also address female identity in general.

7. What links the 5 Geuzen uniforms together in concept, fashion-wise and aesthetically? What do they say about female identity, since they are female identity apparel. Why specific choices which centre around: labour/functionality; sexuality; independence/self-sustenance; practicality/leisure. Why these 5 categories, and what do they say about female identity?

Actually it won't remain five, because we keep developing them. It's again one of those threads that continues evolving. We often joke about the uniforms constituting a set of De Geuzen vows, like nuns pledging chastity, obedience and poverty. Each uniform represents a characteristic that we have as a group, but also these characteristics are qualities frequently associated negatively or positively with women in general. *Utility and Service*, the first uniform, is a kind of a parody of everything from blue-stockings suffragettes, to nuns, to airline stewardesses. We wanted to make an efficient, built for battle, hostess with the mostest. *Frivolity and Folly* is more baroque and is a mix of coquettishness, pride and rebellion. The *Do-It-Yourself*

Uniform comes from the fact that we're great fans of handicraft and self-reliance. *Simplicity and Ease* is almost an activist T-shirt, working off the principle "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me."

As a research strand, our uniforms are a means of thinking through roles. We had discussions with people who thought the uniforms were about fixing female identity, but it is really not about diagnosis! We really see identity as something in flux. It's more about opening it up, or breaking it apart as a question. And play is crucial. In a way, you can see them as a tongue in cheek portrait, especially when they are worn by our set of online paper dolls. This is one of the luxuries of practice over theory. Through visuals, we don't have to be linear in our approach. We can keep it playful and even ambiguous as things are not black and white. What we enjoy about developing the uniforms is the more they grow, the more interesting they get. They too are an ongoing collection. And you never know what the future will bring, maybe when we get older we'll do post-menopausal uniforms [laughter].

8. Association game [very hilarious]

- Open source: recipe swapping
- Dress code: unlimited, guise – disguise to be played with and manipulated
- DIY: in your own hands, handwork, active making
- Consumption: active consumption not passive
- Information: navigation and narrative
- Mapping: detour and getting lost
- Uniform: ...but not the same
- Copy/replica: following traces, not reproduction
- Display: play
- Feminism: friend? [laughter], infinite space, point of orientation which is not fixed, multiple meanings, a pink sewing machine*

*We once got into this huge discussion with a curator when doing a show. She argued when seeing our sewing machine set up to make the DIY uniform, that we were buying into stereotypical feminine behaviour and going against the grain of feminism. But we argues that like a computer, or as the Guerrilla girls proved with their pink pencil, the sewing machine is a power tool.

9. What are your own personal favourite Geuzennaam?

Renee: bearded oyster as its perfectly graphic

Femke: I like wearing different words at different moments, that also comes closer to the idea of the uniforms, it really feels like roles you're playing. So you can feel like a "afgelikte boterham" [lit. licked off sandwich, a slut] or a "tiepkip" [lit. type chick, a secretary].

Riek: oh mine is bitch-in-heat

10. What is your relationship with open source ideology? It is listed on de Geuzen homepage together with other concepts.

I think it's important to view it in the context of our other links on the site like, "potlatch", "gift", or "a guide or how to be a perfect hostess". Open source for us is about shared knowledge and knowledge building, and this is something not necessarily valued within an artistic context – especially when considering the notion of originality. On that level, we square more with the digital world than with the art world. Just as we take inspiration from different people and appropriate ideas and make them our own, we work with the understanding that perhaps people will take our ideas, appropriate them and make them their own. So it works on that basic level. And if people do take things from us, we always like to hear what has become of it, or how they have renewed it. For instance, now we have given some of our Geuzen T-shirts to a guy who asked us if he could sew his own (alterations/manipulations) on them. So again the role of the facilitator becomes in this respect active in that you hand over and relay knowledge. By relay we mean, people take up an idea, add to it, and at a certain point you can pick it up again. Of course this happens amongst the three of us, this is our working process. When you collaborate as a group, you have a whole different concept about ownership, and that's what we acknowledge when using these terms. We still consider ourselves authors, so we claim our property and are accountable for what we do. But at a certain moment it is distributed and becomes other people's property. Later it may come back to us or maybe not.

With our work its clear that meaning arises through use, and therefore it has to be shared. That's why the DIY section of our site is so important to us. It's really a users space. Also, aside from literally giving how-to-guides, we appreciate when works are hijacked or appropriated. For instance, recently some of our Geuzennaam T-shirts were featured in a Dutch gay teen mag. And in that context it was interesting to see that the derogatory names for women are also used against homosexual men. So here is where through exchange, territories and identities are crossed. It's precisely these kinds of mutations in meaning, we're looking for whether it's through our online or offline activities.