

(issue 29 - spring 2012 - www.afterall.org)

Interzone: On Three Works by Wendelien van Oldenborgh Sven Lütticken



Wendelien van Oldenborgh, Supposing I love you. And you also love me, 2011, architectural intervention with bench and projection and montage of still images with dialogue, sound, English subtitles, 13min, stills. Courtesy the artist and Wilfried Lentz Rotterdam

In today's franchise-driven cinema, the production of 'trilogies' is de rigueur. Three being the magic number, the trilogy — a secularised triptych — gives a semblance of artistic planning and closure to a series (but of course there can always be a follow-up trilogy). To the extent that Wendelien van Oldenborgh's three slide works *Après la reprise, la prise* (2009), *Pertinho de Alphaville (So Close to Alphaville, 2010)* and *Supposing I love you. And you also love me* (2011) follow the logic of the franchise trilogy, they do so in an almost parodic manner — as when some of the protagonists of *Après la reprise* return, as if by 'popular demand', in *Supposing I love you*. In fact, *Supposing I love you* is something of an entr'acte, for the official third part of van Oldenborgh's trilogy will be the work *Bete & Deise* (2012—). Even in this case, then, the trilogy format spawns spin-offs, but the interrelations between the parts are far from clear-cut. Strategies and motifs recur, but in a manner that recalls musical variations more than the relentless branding of franchises.

All three works consist of a cinematic series of slides that dissolve into each other ('real' slides in the first two pieces, digital stills in the last) in dialogue with a soundtrack on which we hear what we presume are the voices of those we see in the images, but not in sync.¹ In *Après la reprise*, two women tell youngsters in a Belgian vocational school about how they once worked in a jeans factory that closed down, leading to new careers (of sorts) playing themselves on stage; in *Pertinho*, employees of a clothes factory talk about how their factory space was turned into a showroom (that is, into a performative arena); in *Supposing I love you*, some of the youngsters from *Après la reprise* are gathered in a Dutch radio studio, while Tariq Ramadan watches them and asks them questions from a lecture hall in London. If such a description seems to impose a rather crude form-content dichotomy on the works, they themselves do everything to undermine it.

Let's start with the entr'acte: *Supposing I love you*. Recorded at the Royal College of Art building by Kensington Gardens in London, Ramadan reflects on his short tenure as guest professor and 'integration consultant' in Rotterdam, and lectures on reason, religion and art.² Paraphrasing Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, Ramadan states that art is 'the best way to define life. Art is all about opposition and conflicts. [...] You might not get a rational answer, but you might get an artistic answer.' For Nietzsche, as Ramadan recalls, this

answer lay in the Greek tragedy, which was capable of ‘reconciling the irreconcilable.’ What Ramadan does not state explicitly in his voice-over is that this (ir)reconcilable difference is theorised by Nietzsche as the polarity of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the crystal-clear dream-image and intoxicated abandonment. The former is associated with the visual arts and the latter with music, while language can go either way. With the emergence of Socrates, the Apollonian principle would morph into dialectical reason, with language becoming rationalist and tragedy perishing.³

Nietzsche’s mythological media theory was dedicated to Wagner. Wagner’s operatic *Gesamtkunstwerk* was to be the return of the ancient tragedy, the new Apollonian-Dionysian synthesis. As Matthew Wilson Smith has stressed, Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* was never a purely artistic synthesis. It was always also a social utopia, destined to meld its audiences into the organic community of the *Volk* — in which there would be no place for, for instance (and most notoriously), Jews.⁴ Although Nietzsche would come to divest himself of Wagner’s increasingly reactionary aesthetic politics (and his anti-Semitism in particular), this early text still contains the paeans to the German Volk that were obligatory in Wagnerian circles.

Writing about Christoph Schlingensiefel’s work, Diedrich Diederichsen uses the term ‘negative *Gesamtkunstwerk*’, which he characterises as a ‘mise en scène of dissonance, of the non-reconciliation of the arts and between the arts and their environment’.⁵ In this, Schlingensiefel’s work — for all its Wagnerism — reflects the critique of Wagner’s aesthetico-political ideology by the neo-avant-garde of the late 1950s and 60s. In his ‘Notes on the Creation of a Total Art’ (1958), Allan Kaprow describes how Wagnerian and later Symbolist attempts at creating a *Gesamtkunstwerk* were ‘modelled on the earlier examples of the church: essentially hierarchies of the several arts organised by master directors’.⁶ Like other artists of his generation, Kaprow strove for a more pragmatic montage of various artistic media, and of ‘art media’ and ‘life media’, as Dick Higgins put it. They in fact resuscitated the Wagnerian ideal of integration, but in a more egalitarian and non-hierarchical version. Dissonance can be harmony in disguise. Van Oldenborgh’s own form of the negative *Gesamtkunstwerk* reflects on such paradoxes.

At one point in his 1958 essay, Kaprow notes that the Bauhaus had modernised the form of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* without changing the essential project. Supposing I love you is partially set in a radio studio in Hilversum, the Netherlands, designed by architect Piet Elling in a post-War take on the idiom of De Stijl. Like the early Bauhaus, De Stijl was still marked by a crypto-Wagnerian longing for synthesis, with architecture rather than music as the master discipline. But then, as suggested in a passage from a book on Elling read out by one of the students in *Supposing I love you*, this idiom became above all a coded signifier for the 'desired openness, unrestrictedness and dynamics of the new democratic society'.⁷ In recent years, the latent identification of this idiom and of the ideal of democratic openness with nationalist notions of 'Dutchness' has been strengthened, as populist politicians and authors harp on about 'our Dutch identity'. Today, of course, the absolute other in the Netherlands is not the Jew but the Muslim, especially the headscarf-wearing woman.

Within *Supposing I love you*, the moment when architecture becomes image and this image itself is reduced to a 'readable' signifier is in fact mirrored by a touching sequence in which a girl tells about being perceived as 'threatening' by her teacher simply because she wears a headscarf. Of course, we never see the girl utter these words, since the images in van Oldenborgh's montage of media and people are stills, not moving images. As Roland Barthes noted, film (and video) stills are rich in details and in potential narratives.⁸ Viewers are challenged to combine the words on the soundtrack with what they see on the slides, making connections between voices and faces, and since the matches are not verifiable, one tends to be rather aware of this decision-making process.



Wendelien van Oldenborgh, Après la reprise, la prise, 2009, slide installation in architectural setting. Installation view, Wilfried Lentz, Rotterdam, 2009. Photograph: Bárbara Wagner. Courtesy the artist and Wilfried Lentz Rotterdam

Après la reprise, la prise is a projection of slides that blend and fade into one another — a dissolve effect generated by using three stacked projectors.⁹ For the most part, the slides are stills isolated from van Oldenborgh’s film footage. The footage is also the source of the fragments of conversations heard on the accompanying soundtrack. The slides show two women who used to work in a Levi’s factory sharing their experiences with the pupils at a technical school in the Belgian town of Mechelen.

After Levi’s closed down the plant in 1998, the women for some time toured with a play about the workers’ reaction. This play turned them into post-Fordist performers of their own industrial past. However, pay was minimal, and their new occupation could not financially sustain the women in the long run. Some shots show a classroom used for teaching sewing, featuring equipment that, the women exclaim, looks just like that

in the Levi's factory. However, the classroom is about to be demolished because the pupils no longer have an interest in sewing, preferring to follow their own post-Fordist dreams, which, as the tale of the former Levi's workers suggests, may be elusive. In his analysis of *Après la reprise*, Eric de Bruyn stresses the element of what one can call self-performance: the workers' becoming actors performing their former social roles.¹⁰

In other works by van Oldenborgh, there is a similar play on the ambiguities of performance, with performers sometimes reading (historical) texts written in the first person, and at other times speaking as themselves. The women in *Après la reprise* were once solidly Fordist workers, executing repetitive tasks. As post-Fordist freelancers, they act differently; they are no longer paid for abstract labour, but for empathic role-play. Furthermore, the roles they play are based on themselves; self and role are inextricably entangled. In this respect, even though they act on stage, their development also reflects 'reality' TV formats — though these rarely (if ever) focus on factory work.

Pertinho de Alphaville in a sense transplants *Après la reprise* to Brazil. The work makes a montage between two sites in São Paulo: the Wearplay clothing factory and the Teatro Oficina. The latter, designed by Lina Bo Bardi, is a venue for avant-garde theatre performances in which the distinction between performers and audience is regularly undermined — something facilitated by the architecture of the space, which is more like a street, with arcades on either side, than like a conventional theatre. In a more explicitly politicised version of Kaprow's Happenings, the audience is implicated and activated. Since the nineteenth century, artists and theorists have dreamed of breaking the division between actors on stage and a passive, captive audience. Wagner imagined his audience at Bayreuth as pilgrims, as a *Kultgemeinschaft* sharing in an aesthetico-religious mystery, even though he effectively created a wide gulf between spectacle and audience with his theatre design. The synthesis could only be imagined as phantasmagoric spectacle, as Adorno noted, and in this sense Wagner provided the perfect model for Hollywood: the birth of the cinema from the spirit of music.¹¹



Wendelien van Oldenborgh, Pertinho de Alphaville, 2010, slide projection in architectural setting, language Portuguese, English subtitles, 20min. Installation view, 29th São Paulo Biennial. Courtesy the artist and Wilfried Lentz Rotterdam

The twentieth century saw various avant-garde attempts at ‘activating’ the spectator, from Bertolt Brecht to Guy Debord and Augusto Boal; in recent years, such projects have been subjected to critique by, among others, Jacques Rancière. According to Rancière, they disenfranchise the spectator even while they attempt to emancipate him or her, for they — ironically — put the spectator in the passive position of victim. Furthermore, ‘looking is also an action that confirms or modifies that distribution, and [...] “interpreting the world” is already a means of transforming it, of reconfiguring it. The spectator is active.’¹² True enough, but while it may seem terribly enlightened to state that the spectator is always already active and already emancipated, this seems to frustrate any attempt at differentiation even more than — for instance — Guy Debord’s Manichean opposition between spectacle and played life. At least Debord had two categories, rather than one, which might be the

beginning of a series. As Rancière admits, ‘Certainly many improvements in theatrical performance resulted from that breaking down of the traditional distribution of places.’¹³ And were many attempts at ‘activating’ the spectator not also ways of reconfiguring spectatorship? Boal’s notion of the ‘spect-actor’, developed in the context of his ‘theatre of the oppressed’, problematised both sides of the equation in order to stress the need for concrete action under dire political circumstances.¹⁴ Yes, the spectator may always be already active — but what is this activity? What kinds of acts and which modes of action are dominant, and which are blocked yet desperately needed?

As one of the voices in *Pertinho* notes, at the entrance of the Teatro Oficina is a sign in which the ‘r’ in ‘Teatro’ is put between brackets — and ‘te ato’ would mean ‘I act on you’. *Pertinho* brings the different meanings and modalities of acting into sharp focus. We hear stories about past collective actions — strikes — organised by once-powerful trade unions, while the workers at the Wearplay factory have become actors in a different sense. While the women in *Après la reprise* went on to act on the stage, here the stage has entered the factory. Until 2008, Wearplay both designed and produced clothes for corporations such as H&M, though the product development was already more profitable than the manufacture. When the worldwide financial crisis hit and H&M wanted the factory to deliver items for a price that was below cost, the director decided to change Wearplay’s business strategy completely: the company would sell its own clothes locally (which still involved the firing of many employees due to the decreased level of production).

When it became apparent that the local nature of the clothes production was a ‘unique selling point’, the shop and the factory were integrated, so that browsing customers could see the seamstresses at work. A similar theatricalisation of production can be seen in Volkswagen’s much publicised ‘transparent factory’ (Gläserne Manufaktur) in Dresden.¹⁵ As work becomes spectacle, production is seemingly made ‘transparent’. In this sense, van Oldenborgh’s work proposes a radically different production aesthetic; rather than presenting us with readable tableaux, she implicates us in a montage of media and actors — including us as viewers — that is anything but obvious.



Pertinho de Alphaville, 2010, slide projection in architectural setting, sound Portuguese, English subtitles, 20min. Production still: Bárbara Wagner. Courtesy the artist and Wilfried Lentz Rotterdam

The analysis of a work such as *Pertinho de Alphaville* can hardly avoid appearing more orderly and linear than the experience of the work itself, for better or for worse. If Nietzsche created an almost Manichaean opposition between dialectical reason and true art, the aesthetic domain is precisely about the dialogue — the dialectic — of senses and sense, of multivalent montage and linear analysis. Witnessing *Pertinho* or *Après la reprise*, the viewer gradually pieces together what might be termed the work's narrative, by combining images and sounds whose relations are far from self-evident. Faces and voices don't necessarily match, and the subtitles literally stand at an angle to the image, as they are projected separately on the left wall of the corner that is spanned by the screen on which the slides are projected. All of this helps to make the experience an active one, without making the viewer get up to move about physically. The stills sliding into one another can have something of a phantasmagoric effect; they are more mystifying than regular moving

images, yet it is precisely this phantasmagoric quality that stimulates critical viewing — and listening. When it is unclear how image A relates to voice B, the viewer/listener becomes suspicious and somewhat irritated.

Van Oldenborgh's work is an art of interstices — of the gaps between still images, between images and subtitles and between the free intervals and intermittent rhythms of the soundtrack. The soundtracks do not consist only of spoken words. Music also plays a role in these works, most explicitly in *Supposing I love you*, for which the soundtrack combines spoken words, rhythmical drumming and occasional piano notes. Van Oldenborgh creates an intermedial structure that is perhaps more of a *mise en scène* of difference, both aesthetically and socially, than one of dissonance — since dissonance is always the other of harmony (and can be, as we have already noted, harmony in disguise). Referring to Nietzsche's categories of the Apollonian and Dionysian, van Oldenborgh has stated that she is interested in the conditions under which incommensurability becomes productive, without any merger or synthesis taking place.¹⁶

“If Marshall McLuhan interpreted the effects of modern media in terms of a return to preliterate oral culture, van Oldenborgh's work complicates all grand linear and cyclical narratives. Her installations constitute in-between spaces.”

In *Supposing I love you*, the emphasis shifts from the narrative about workers' becoming performers to the youngsters' unsure self-performance in a society uncertain of its economic future and insecure about the presence of (economically, culturally, perhaps sexually) threatening others. ‘Are you broadcasting?’ Ramadan asks the kids in the studio. Radio played an important role in van Oldenborgh's video installation *No False Echoes* (2008), which was shot in the monumental building of Radio Kootwijk and addresses the radio broadcasts sent to Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) by Phillips Broadcasting Company in the 1920s and 30s.¹⁷ Here radio is the classic one- directional medium of modern mass communication, but *No False Echoes* turns the radio studio into an echo chamber in which many voices interact and interfere. In *Supposing I love*

you, the post-War radio studio is connected with the RCA in London. Together they create a new kind of acoustic space that is not tied to any one site — but which can manifest itself in the exhibition spaces where van Oldenborgh's piece is installed. If Marshall McLuhan interpreted the effects of modern media in terms of a return to preliterate oral culture, van Oldenborgh's work complicates all grand linear and cyclical narratives. Her installations constitute in-between spaces. Aby Warburg argued that in the course of history, the *Andachtsraum* (devotional space) created by art was increasingly supplanted by the *Denkraum* (thinking space) created by science (although Warburg feared telegraph and telephone would destroy both).¹⁸ Van Oldenborgh's works constitute spaces for thinking precisely because they are also spaces of aesthetic affect, because they are not didactic displays but sensuous encounters in and in between various senses. Obviously, the temporary spaces created by her work are usually populated by a monoculture of biennial-goers. Her work thus might be accused of posing as 'social' work while being insufficiently 'engaged', of not promising to 'fix' anything and ultimately confirming passive spectatorial habits — or, conversely, of being work that would be perfectly acceptable as contemporary art if it did not raise the dreaded spectres of activation and emancipation, which we now know to be ideological folly. Van Oldenborgh's work would thus appear to be equally problematic from opposing perspectives.

But van Oldenborgh never promised a synthesis. Rather than grandly positing the Artwork of the Future, van Oldenborgh works through the antinomies of contemporary artistic and intellectual practice. In this her artistic method is akin to the writing of history — a practice that can only be productive if concepts are pushed to the point where the antinomies they constitute are exposed as historical contradictions that are themselves seen as traces of history to be explored and exploited, rather than as logical paradoxes to be removed.¹⁹ Van Oldenborgh's fractured totality, her broken *Gesamtkunstwerk*, exhibits and develops the contradictions that modernity has bequeathed to us, and the recent transformations which these dynamic and unstable contradictions have undergone. Both on- and off-screen it is populated by spect-actors in search of scripts or the right moment in which to improvise a scene. This may not be the utopian gesture of old, but it is artistic work with an eye towards a (barely) possible future.

Footnotes

1. When *Supposing I love you* was selected for inclusion in the Danish Pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale, the Pavilion's organisers deemed the risk of slide projectors getting jammed or breaking down over the duration of the exhibition too great; hence the digital option was pursued. ↑
2. Tariq Ramadan's tenure as guest professor at Erasmus University and as advisor to the city of Rotterdam ended in 2009 over a controversy concerning his work for the Iranian network PressTV. Ramadan, essentially a conservative interested in integrating Islam in Europe, is habitually accused of being a fundamentalist 'wolf in sheep's clothing' by right-wing populists. At the moment of writing, the Dutch Wikipedia entry on Ramadan still hawks the myth that he staged a campaign to prevent Voltaire's play 'Fanaticism, or Mahomet the Prophet' (1736) in Geneva in 1993 (http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tariq_Ramadan#cite_ref-7); for Ramadan's rebuttal, see 'Se prendre pour Voltaire?', <http://www.tariqramadan.com/Se-prendre-pour-Voltaire.html> (both last accessed on 24 October 2011). ↑
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (1872), in *Kritische Studienausgabe 1* (ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari), Munich: DTV, 1988, pp.92–95. English translation available at http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/Nietzsche/tragedy_all.htm (last accessed on 24 October 2011). According to Nietzsche, the 'Socratic' tendency in Euripides's tragedies leads to the atrophying of the chorus, from which the tragedy had emerged in the first place. One might note that in *Supposing I love you*, the youngsters form a quasi-chorus, interrogated Socratically by Ramadan. ↑
4. Matthew Wilson Smith, *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace*, New York and London: Routledge, 2007, pp.9–10. ↑
5. Diedrich Diederichsen, 'Combating Discursive Scarcity, Futile Intention, and the *Negative Gesamtkunstwerk*: Christoph Schlingensief and His Music', in Susanne Giensheimer (ed.), *Christoph Schlingensief: German Pavilion, 2011. 54th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011, p.190. ↑

6. Allan Kaprow, 'Notes on the Creation of a Total Art', *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (ed. Jeff Kelley), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p.10.↑
7. Quoted from Wim de Wagt, *Piet Elling, 1897–1962: Een samenstemmende eenheid*, Bussum: Thoth, 2008, p.139. Translation the author's.↑
8. See Roland Barthes 'Le Troisième sens' (1970), an important text for van Oldenborgh. See also R. Barthes, 'The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills', *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation* (trans. Richard Howard), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, pp.41–62.↑
9. The title evokes *La Reprise du travail aux usines Wonder* (1968), directed by Jacques Willemont, one of the films shown in Harun Farocki's *Workers Leaving the Factory in Eleven Decades* (2006).↑
10. See Eric C.H. de Bruyn, 'Intermittent Conversations on Leaving the Factory', *Texte zur Kunst*, no.79, September 2010, pp.128–44.↑
11. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Versuch über Wagner' (1938), *Die musikalischen Monographien (Gesammelte Schriften vol. 13)* (ed. Rolf Tiedemann), Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2003, p.102.↑
12. Jacques Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', *Artforum*, vol.45, no.7, March 2007, p.277.↑
13. *Ibid.*, p.278.↑
14. See Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed* (trans. Charles A. McBride, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993.↑
15. See Sven Lütticken, 'Secrets of the See-Through Factory: On Intervening in Opaque Transparency', *Open*, no.22, forthcoming.↑
16. Email from the artist, 8 September 2011.↑
17. On this project see Binna Choi and Wendelien van Oldenborgh (ed.), *A Well Respected Man, or Book of Echoes*, Utrecht and Berlin: Casco and Sternberg Press, 2010.↑

18. See Aby Warburg, *Schlangenritual: Ein Reisenbericht* (1923), Berlin: Wagenbach, 1988, p.56.↑
19. My terminology here is based on the account of the dialectic in Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, London and New York: Verso, 2009.↑