The polyphonic work of Wendelien van Oldenborgh
By Anke Bangma (Published in Metropolis M No. 4, 2008)

How can issues that remain unthinkable in our contemporary cultural and political consciousness be addressed, or issues that seem hostage to the reiteration of a particular rhetoric be opened up? These questions form the starting point for the recent work of Wendelien van Oldenborgh (Rotterdam, 1962), in which a detour through the past becomes a means to weigh the present. Crucial to her practice is a shift from product to production, i.e. a shift from taking a particular position to creating conditions in which others are invited to inhabit different positions and test them against one another. Van Oldenborgh's artworks therefore consist of two stages: they involve a public live event, followed by a film installation.

The project *Maurits Script* (2006) departs from a little remembered episode in Dutch history: the short period in which Holland had a colony in Brazil, governed by Johan Maurits van Nassau. The basis for this piece is a script for multiple voices, which is composed of fragments of historical documents, placing different parties and perspectives side by side and thus juxtaposing the official history of the time with other narratives.

The script was recited by nine performers, and filmed in the presence of an invited audience in the Golden Hall of the *Mauritshuis* (The Hague), the monumental city palace Johan Maurits had built during his governorship. The script gives an account of such topics as civilisation, the art of strategic government, grand conquests, the economic advantages of slavery, and the supposed cannibalistic habits of the native population. The voices that tell these stories keep a distance to the views they express. It is evident that they do not identify with their roles, but read their texts in a Brechtian manner.

In Brecht's dramaturgy, citing instead of empathizing with a character is one of the strategies to achieve an alienation effect. Brecht instructed his actors to speak their lines as if from a distance, as if they themselves could not believe the words they were uttering. This would allow the performer to stand beside their role, remain an observer to the presented scene, and thus also prevent the audience from identifying with it.[1]

Van Oldenborgh's approach results in a similar kind of alienation. She collaborates with non-actors, who are given the script as material to work with in a live setting; but she also gives each historical character two voices and activates what each performer/participant brings to the scene. Thus Johan Maurits, for example, is delivered in the lofty, theatrical voice of a Surinam woman, but also in the hasty voice of a Dutchman, who seems to rush through his lines as if he wants to give them as little importance as possible. The intonation and the cultural and ethnic background of the participants, which can be traced in their accents and their appearance, resonate in the cited historical statements.

Polyphony
This kind of polyphony is characteristic for Van Oldenborgh's work. It is a principle that has its origins in music. Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin translated it to language and forms of speech in which multiple conflicting, yet equal voices, intersect. This principle not only applies to a diversity of independent voices, but also to the hybrid nature of every utterance. Each verbal performance is inevitably 'polysemic' – imprinted with the intentions, opinions, but also the accent of its speaker, and what this accent reveals about her or him. But each spoken word also inevitably resonates with the meanings and values others have already attached to it in previous utterances, and thus is part of a many-voiced choir of cultural and social references, with which we are consciously as well as unconsciously in a continuous dialogue.[2]

In Van Oldenborgh's work this polyphony and dialogue are activated explicitly. In *Maurits Script* each historical document is literally made to speak in a 'double voiced discourse', which makes the different perspectives and ideological scenarios embedded in the historical material rub against each other. While the participants take turns in assuming their place in front of the camera to read passages from the script, the others are captured by a second camera, now engaged in a discussion about their readings of the script and the legacy of Dutch colonial history. In the film version of this work these simultaneous scenes of the public event are shown on opposite screens, as parallel projections of the past and the present.

Trilogy
Maurits Script is the last part of a trilogy that Van Oldenborgh made under the rubric *A Certain Brazilianness*.[3] The series is inspired by a specific understanding of cultural identity. Searching for ways to differentiate a specifically Brazilian identity from the hegemonic influence of Europe, post-colonial Brazilian subjectivity defined itself by negating the ideal of belonging to a uniform or dominant culture.

Instead it embraced the ability to assimilate the properties of the Other and to exist amidst conflicting forces by being open to influence and change.[4]

The idea of *A Certain Brazilianness* provides a productive perspective for posing questions about the ways in which national culture and identity are currently being discussed within Europe and the Netherlands within an increasingly polarised politics. 'A certain…' Brazilianness, Dutchness, etc., leaves space for mixed identities, in which certain characteristics may lead to mutual recognition without having to be absolute or dominant, and without getting trapped in the stronghold of a rhetoric of 'us' and them'.

But *A Certain Brazilianness* aims to offer more than a possibility to change the terms of the debate on subjectivity and identity. It is also a motto for a working method that is able to avoid making judgments from yet another fixed point of view, remaining open and tentative, rather than guiding differentiating voices and positions in specific directions or demanding that they reach any conclusive point.

While *Maurits Script* achieves this by means of citation and dialogue, earlier works – such as *Polyphonic Stage* (2005), *The Basis for a Song* (2005) and *AC_B_Sound Track Stage* (2006) – engaged with the hip-hop scene, which also has its origins in Brazil. Hip-hop can be taken to a polyphonic genre of text and music par excellence, because of the way it uses improvisation and free association, and mixes cultural codes, appropriating minority positions and mirroring them back to society.

The Basis for a Song is situated in a music studio, where DJ Fader and Scep improvise texts about the history of the Rotterdam squatters' scene during a one-day recording session. While *Maurits Script* provides a commentary on an episode in historiography, the text improvisation in *The Basis for a Song* functions as a means of writing an unwritten history. The recording session starts with a meeting with two of Rotterdam's first squatters, who give a strikingly pragmatic account of how they occupied an abandoned building complex and started using it as living and working space with permission of the local authorities. It is the rappers who expand on the political implications of this action from their own perspectives, appropriating the significance of squatting in their own terms, and associating the problems of seventies and eighties urban politics with issues of today.

They outline a development from an attitude of tolerance, meant to keep countercultural movements satisfied with a place of their own, to an economically driven policy, which has learnt to offer deals to citizens as a means of facilitating its own ambitions. The slide-installation reflects the principles of hip-hop: the leading line is formed by the music, which unfolds with breaks and repetitions, while the two rappers each in their own style practice, adjust and mix their lyrics and rhythms, thus continuously rewriting their versions of the history of occupying space. The images form their own beat of stills. The mixing of different voices finds a visual equivalent in the overlaying reflections of the performers, camera-operators and the audience in the window of the recording studio.

If I were a Dutchman
Radio, the medium central to *No False Echoes* (2008), historically represents the opposite of polyphony. Especially in Europe, radio developed as a state controlled instrument, used to edify the masses through speeches and lectures, and thus characterized by an authoritative voice.[5] The radio voice is therefore the perfect example of an 'acousmatic' voice, the bodiless voice that – like the voice of God or of our conscience – derives its power from the invisibility of its source.[6]

No False Echoes recalls this history of radio and talks about Dutch radio in colonial Indonesia. On behalf of the Dutch government Philips not only exported radio technology to the colony, but also started producing the radio programmes, in order to ensure their innocent 'uplifting' content, and to keep any unwanted, political voices off the ether.

While the Dutch colonisers found nostalgic comfort in reports about St. Nicholas and other reminders of home, the Indonesian people were busy developing their own nationalist self-awareness. *No False Echoes* deals with these simultaneous yet opposing nationalist movements, against the background of the current revival of nationalist sentiments in The Netherlands.

The setting for this work is the former main building of Radio Kootwijk, an architectural monument to modernism and progress, yet also clearly a building that is vacant and has lost its function. The voices that construct *No False Echoes* are not improvising or searching, but rather assertive, at times almost didactic, fitting the nature of a radio programme. The acousmatic effect of radio is recreated by locating the speakers on a balcony, where they can be heard but not be seen by the audience in the hall below. As in a radio talk show, the Dutch perspective is discussed by two experts on radio history and an analyst of today's political tendencies. The voice of the Indonesian independence movement is represented by a political pamphlet from 1913, *Als ik eens Nederlander was* (*If I were a Dutchman*). This provocative

manifesto is recited by Salah Edin, the Moroccan-Dutch rap artist known for his biting criticism of today's perception of immigrants and discussions around integration programmes for foreigners [inburgering?].[7] Edin presents the text with conviction; there is no distantiating reading or improvisational tasting and testing of words here, rather a recognition of and identification with a dissenting voice, which echoes with his own rap *Het land van* (*The country of*).

The role of the camera
The ways in which Van Oldenborgh utilises precisely chosen historical documents reminds of documentary theatre. Recent theatre pieces such as *The Monkey Trial* (2004) by theatre group tg STAN and *History Tilt* (2007) by Hans-Werner Kroesinger take up historical debates by basing their scripts on archive material. These performances often adopt the form of a trial, and this specific dramaturgy drives the narrative relentlessly towards its inescapable end.[8] There is no such narrative drama in the work of Van Oldenborgh. The performative situations in *Maurits Script* or *The Basis for a Song* may have their starting point in a given script, but the outcome of the script is undecided. The historical material is investigated for its meaning and relevance in an open process of (re)reading and (re)writing, in the presence of the audience.

In documentary theatre such explicit commentary from the perspective of the present is often, deliberately, withheld. The signifying gesture here seems to be the overlapping of past and present. Historical debates, as in the court case of 1925 in *The Monkey Trial* – which aimed to ban the teaching of evolutionary theory from the American educational system – are shown to be so similar to today's rhetoric that history seems to literally repeat itself with identical positions.

Van Oldenborgh's approach seems more closely related to the film practices of Peter Watkins or Jean Rouch. Watkins developed a means of addressing past political conflicts in the present tense. He worked with non-actors, who he required to investigate the political situation of the period and act out their character's subject position within it. In the improvisational identification of the participants with their roles, the often explosive historical relations are actualised and given renewed urgency.[9] Acknowledging that the people in his anthropological films were inevitably performing the filmed situation, Rouch asked them to play themselves or to comment on the images he had made of them.[10]

In both practices the role of the camera as instigator is crucial. It is Watkins' presence with a camera crew in the re-enactments of historical situations, which transforms the power relations of the past into a 'live event' that must play itself out in the here and now of the participants. Rouch called his camera a 'provocateur' and 'accelerator' of pro-filmic reality.[11] Though in Van Oldenborgh's case we are dealing first of all with speech acts, the live production of a film event is also the structuring principle in her work. The meeting of different participants around the joint reading or writing of a script engenders a situation in which historical points of view challenge their positions in the present.

The provisional context of a live recording without rehearsal makes it impossible to decide upon a position in advance, and necessitates taking action in the here and now of the event. The visible presence of cameras, microphones and lighting, however, also emphasizes that we are dealing with something that is being produced: though the participants are mostly playing themselves, they are indeed performing (and in the case of DJ Fader, Scep and Salah Edin they are also professional performers in their own discipline), and presenting themselves in a specific role to the cameras and audience.

At stake in this performative method is not an effort to come to a more truthful representation of historical or contemporary reality, or to merely correct predominant views. Towards the end of *No False Echoes* participating political analyst Baukje Prins rightfully concludes that polyphony should not be mistaken for a new kind of realism, since any realism implies that it can lay claim to a universal truth. Van Oldenborgh's working methods by contrast undercut the tendency to look for new all-encompassing claims to reality and the illusion that the homogeneous nature of reality could be easily and unproblematically rendered visible. While The Netherlands and other European nations try to arm themselves against the increasing complexity and change within their societies with defensive gestures such as fixing 'our' historical canon, Van Oldenborgh's work is a plea to investigate relations and inhabit possible positions in a conflicting reality.

June 2008

Notes
[1.] Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke 15: Schriften zum Theater 1*, 1967, p. 546, p. 369, and p. 406.

[2.] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, 'From Discourse in the Novel', in: Hazard Adams en Leroy Searle (ed.), *Critical Theory Since 1965*, 1986, pp. 665-680.

[3.] Van Oldenborgh borrowed the term 'A certain Brazilianness' from a text by Maria Moreira on Ricardo Basbaum's work *NBP – New Basis for Personality*. Both participated in Van Oldenborgh's *The Polyphonic Stage*. See Maria Moreira, 'Rigor/Resonance', 1997. www.acertainbrazilianness.net

[4.] In the twenties the Brazilian modernists deliberately revived the principle of 'antropophagia' (cannibalism) that was ascribed to the Brazilian natives, interpreting it as a strategy for appropriating the properties of the Other. See www.acertainbrazilianness.net

[5.] Radio and the radio voice had a very different history in the US, where the different immigrant groups could find an echo of their differing voices and accents in diverse radio plays. The fact that the radio voice does not have a body, and that the "I" speaking in radio is an auditive fiction, here lead to a playful approach to roles and identities. See Wolfgang Hagen, 'Das Radio-Ich', 2005. www.whagen.de

[6.] The power of the acousmatic voice was first described by Mark Chion in *The Voice in Cinema*, 1982; Mladen Dolar elaborates more specifically on radio and the voice of totalitarian regimes in *A Voice and Nothing More*, 2006.

[7.] For his album *Nederlands grote nachtmerrie* Salah Edin produced a much-debated self-portrait which he modelled loosely after the mug-shot of Mohammed B., the murderer of Theo van Gogh. The picture was meant as commentary on the way in which in today's Dutch society any Moroccan with a beard and shaven head runs the risk of being taken for a terrorist. See www.salahedin.com

[8.] These theatre performances follow the example of *Die Ermittlung* (*The Investigation*, 1965) by Peter Weiss, one of the first works of documentary theatre, which re-staged the Auschwitz Trial (1963–1965).

[9.] In Watkins' *La Commune* (2000), for example – a re-enactment of the short period in 1871 in which a socialist government of workers and intellectuals ruled Paris – revolutionaries were played by left-wing activists and the petit-bourgeois were played by small business owners.

[10.] See for example Rouch' films *Moi, un noir* (1957) and *Chronique d'un été* (1960).

[11.] See Mick Eaton, 'The Production of Cinematic Reality', in: *Anthropology – Reality – Cinema: The Films of Jean Rouch*, 1979, pp. 40-53.