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WENDELIE VAN OLDENBORGH

Wilfried Lentz, Rotterdam

A vexing question for artists engaged in social practice is how to measure a work's 'success'. For activist artists seeking to effect change, the burden of proof is in the visible evidence of it over time, while an artist who documents or comments on social conditions might be judged on how well they merge form and content into an instantly legible message. Wendelien van Oldenborgh's films and installations take on social and political subjects, which are frequently linked to the past and present of her native Netherlands. Through her collaborative working methods and experimental display strategies, the artist has managed to displace the expectations of reception by foregrounding the temporal and social aspects of production.

Van Oldenborgh's recent exhibition, 'Footnotes to Beauty and the Right to the Ugly', was a case in point. The subject at hand is an open-plan, multifunctional housing and community centre called 'Het Karregat', designed by Frank van Klingeren for the city of Eindhoven in 1974. Van Klingeren believed that the complex's architectural features, resources and amenities – such as an open-plan school and a bar that also functioned as the entry to a doctor's office – would profoundly shape the relationships among the people living there. This may not sound revolutionary today, but Van Oldenborgh's documentation and videos subtly zoom in on the lingering, radical impact of the architect's original intentions – and of government-subsidized acts of social engineering – by giving a voice to its current occupants and former tenants.

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herman de vries
le depassement de la problematique de l'art
(overtaking the problematic of art),
1990, Yves Klein's manifesto with small
leaves, 56 × 50 cm

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Wendelien van Oldenborgh
*Footnote to Chapter 2 (Experiments don't
need to succeed, they just
need to exist)* from 'Footnotes to Beauty
and the Right to the Ugly', 2014,
HD video installation

Inside the gallery, Van Oldenborgh projected three videos onto both sides of three plywood boards, one of which was suspended and two of which leaned on narrow columns, as if provisionally left there by a building crew. These were the 'Footnotes' (2014) to three 'chapters' of Van Oldenborgh's forthcoming feature-length film, *Beauty and the Right to the Ugly*. The videos in the installation could be taken literally as material citations for a larger exhibition (which premiered at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in November). They also operated as 'teasers' for the film, which was still in post-production when this exhibition opened.

It was perhaps fitting that Van Oldenborgh first presented her study of Het Karregat in Wilfried Lentz's new gallery space, which occupies the former public bath house and laundry of the impressive 1920s Justus van Effen housing complex in Rotterdam (the artist's hometown). Besides the common architectural concern with how public and private space intersect and interact, Het Karregat and Justus van Effen have also both been re-configured and successively renovated with consultation from their tenants, but also according to a market-driven demand to privatize social housing. Whereas walls were proscribed in Het Karregat at the outset, then erected several years later, Justus van Effen's point of pride is its newly restored ochre and red brick façade and a second-storey wrap-around deck. Surrounded by those solid walls, it was impossible for me not to associate the two sites, and to empathize with the architecture itself, when faced with the persistent sequence in *Footnote to chapter 1 (Open architecture for an open society)* of a small bulldozer trying to plough through a brick partition. This was also due to Van Oldenborgh's keen focus on the subjective, emotional relationships we can have to places. In *Footnote to Chapter 3 (Normalisation makes everything safe again)*, the artist trains her camera on a young woman, Maaïke, who has written a love poem to the more recently built walls of Het Karregat; and in *Footnote to Chapter 1* on Hans, Romeo and Clarence, who improvise sounds, words and music inspired by the site.

Alongside the videos, a black and white photographic *Wall Print* (2014) of the school in Het Karregat, scanned from a book about the architect, was cropped to fit beneath the gallery staircase and provided another, deep view into the learning environment. Technical drawings of Het Karregat's floorplan, marked with what appear to this neophyte as Van Oldenborgh's filmmaker's notations, reminded me of a musical score and provided some insight into the artist's working methods. Her sensitive formal treatment of her subjects brings voices from different generations, communities and perspectives into dialogue. She establishes no hierarchy between rumour and reminiscence, architectural fact and paper document. The varied perspectives she opens up with her fragmented installation allow us to speculate about what the artist sees, what the subjects see and what the camera sees, without coalescing into a conclusion. Experiments – whether architectural, artistic, social or political – evolve in space and time. As the subtitle to *Footnote 2* suggests, they 'don't need to succeed, they just need to exist'.

VIVIAN SKY REHBERG

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