

Thinking and Working Alongside Patricia Kaersenhout's *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner Too?*

This presentation of Patricia Kaersenhout's bold and joyous masterwork *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner Too?* is a momentous occasion on a number of accounts. For one, it marks the culmination of over three years' development and numerous community collaborations focused upon uplifting the stories, experiences and extraordinary legacies of Black women and women of colour across history and mythology, as well as in the present time. It also marks the first exhibition staged by de Appel art centre within the Aula of the Broodplaats Lely—taking full advantage of its generous modern layout and the expanse of windows on two walls. The artwork itself also marks a significant merging of two stands within Kaersenhout's practice—that of portraiture and that of symbolic counter-monuments. Her persistent work to dismantle the colonial legacies of racism and sexism are also an attempt to construct what the artist calls a “communal body”.

Crucial to understanding this work is the context of a powerful and growing movement of anti-racist activism within the Netherlands—defending against resurgent nationalism and led through grass-roots movements that stand in dialogue with senior Black women scholars such as prof. Dr. Gloria Wekker and Philomena Essed. It is in Kaersenhout's exceptional energy and dedication to forging links across activism and the arts that her work finds its truly radical note and its indelible public resonance. Working alongside Kaersenhout, one often has to wonder how on earth she does it all—maintaining a demanding exhibition schedule alongside intensive advocacy and social activism? The answer, of course, is within *Guess Whose Coming To Dinner Too?* itself. A work that uplifts the legacies and struggles of Black, Indigenous and women of colour across generations and geographies is itself a source of strength.

In its prototype edition—launched in 2017 at the WOW space in Amsterdam — *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner Too?* was presented as a triangular dining table with each side measuring 8 meters. The wooden table was set with embroidered runners printed by AGA LAB, each one dedicated to Black women and women of colour whom Kaersenhout terms ‘heroines of resistance’. Art viewers might immediately recognise this proposal as a riff on Judy Chicago's icon of feminist art *The Dinner Party* (1974-79). The thirty-nine settings of Chicago's work celebrated women from antiquity to the present, however the majority of the seats at the table were devoted to North American and European heroines. In *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner Too?*, Kaersenhout both changes the work's focus to women of colour, and also renegotiates its form.

For its 2019 presentation, *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner Too?* is brought to its next phase with a long-anticipated body of hand-crafted glass vessels. Produced together with Vrij Glas in Zaandam, these vessels form a sculptural field that radically alters the table's sense of hospitality. Whereas *The Dinner Party* presents each honoured woman on a separate ceramic plate, Kaersenhout has moved towards a collective vision. Her work offers an array of custom bowls, dishes and cups that are designed for many hands, many mouths, and many bellies. This unravelling of the individuated and bourgeois European table was inspired by visits

to collections such as the archaeological Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam and the ethnographic Rotterdam Wereldmuseum. There Kaersenhout was moved in particular by Moche and Chavin pre-Colombian practices of ‘dining with the dead’ – a combination of the social practice of dining together with the ceremonial honouring of those who have passed and of those who are ancestors.

Beyond the individuated corporeality of the European table-setting—each one with a knife and fork, and each one with their own plate – our initial research visit to the Rotterdam Wereldmuseum led to the richly illustrated document “The First New Chronicle and Good Government: On the History of the World and the Incas up to 1615” by Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, an Inka noble.¹ Written as a petition to the Spanish crown Philip III, the document is referred to by scholars as a valuable source for understanding pre-Hispanic Inka times. Among its renowned images is a depiction that holds up to scrutiny the Spanish habit of dining wherein each of the colonisers sat with his own bowl, plate, and spoon, rather than sharing dishes among the seated. Taking community as a priority, for Kaersenhout, a monument is social rather than individual. No equestrian statues of propped-up princes here. Rather an invocation of shared ceremony produced by and awaiting a ‘communal body.’ The setting invokes ceremony as a key to remembering and also a way of connecting the living and the dead.

The notion a ‘communal body’ initially arose in *Guess Who’s Coming To Dinner Too?* through the process of community embroidery workshops. In 2017, these were undertaken with women in the Kolenkit neighbourhood and with a group that included artists, refugees and female victims of domestic violence. Kaersenhout also took the runners to Dakar where the beading was undertaken by women especially skilled in beading techniques. The many hands that touched the fabric contribute to an ongoing texture of connection.

And the work of historical inquiry and making continues. Earlier this year, the first iteration of *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner Too?* was exhibited again in Arnhem, where it was the setting for emancipatory reading groups. In preparation for the current exhibition with de Appel, further embroidery sessions have also been convened. These include an ‘Ensemble’ programme of women’s story-telling in partnership with the neighbourhood organisation ‘Vrouw en Vaart’ in Amsterdam Nieuw-West. A special evening ‘Stitch-In’ was also held in the lead-up to the exhibition, where participants were seated around a triangle of tables, sharing the meditative task of beading as they listened to special guest Emory Douglas—former Minister for Culture of the Black Panther Party. Douglas recounted stories of revolutionary women within the American Black resistance, outlined the Panther’s numerous social programmes such as breakfast clubs, schools, and aged care support that were galvanized by women’s efforts, and recounted the conversations around Black fatherhood and a true sharing of responsibilities among genders. Musician Shishani Vranckx recounted her experiences in Namibia and related women’s struggles throughout the world, concluding in a call-and-response singing

¹ Donna J. Nash, “The First New Chronicle and Good Government: On the History of the World and the Incas up to 1615 by Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala; Ronald Hamilton,” *Ethnohistory*, January 2012, 202.

session that brought the sense of joint investment in these underexposed stories. This truly memorable evening was hosted in June, inside the Aula where the current exhibition takes place.

One of the bold and decisive undertakings of *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner Too?* is also a claim to space. Expanding to its full 10 m version and with two further women honoured at the table—transgender activists Sylvia Riviera and Marsha P. Johnson— it is a work that can hardly be hidden in the corner. Its presentation inside the Aula of Broedplaats Lely affords a properly spacious and dynamic setting for Kaersenhout's historic and communal work. Exhibition designer Rosa te Velde, a long-time collaborator on the project, was invited to envision a scenography and undertook research within the archive of the architect Ben Ingwersen at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam. She relays how this building was designed as a reform school in 1969, as part of an entirely new expansion of Amsterdam in the tail of its post-war reconstruction. Conceived within the modernist legacy of human improvement through design, the space has a ceremonial subtext with its luminous windows and its arched and acoustically advantageous wooden ceiling.

Rosa te Velde makes most of the rhythmic geometry of the lofty window frames by applying fabric panels that bear Ashanti Adrinkra symbols which Kaersenhout has embedded into the patterns of the table runners. The table and space are buoyed with areas of a luminous light blue that draw forward both their dimensions and depth. The underlying grid of Ingwersen's design is plotted in circular gold accents, while a bamboo system for signage is embedded within red-brick bases that cite the rear wall of the space. A triangular bamboo lattice is carried forward from the project's 2017 manifestation as well. This time, the framework is used to suspend tunics designed by BYBROWN, that carry the names and stories of the honoured women printed upon their lining. These garments await men who will perform a Hāka, or ceremonial Māori dance in honor of women, during the exhibition's closing event. Kaersenhout's monument also calls on men to participate through physical gestures and energetic support. The performance is supervised by Kaiako (teachers), and is not permitted to be recorded and circulated online both to prioritise the powerful energy of the moment, and out of respect for Māori culture.

This iteration of *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner Too?* staged in the Broedplaats Lely Aula is a multi-faceted, lyrical and emphatic art work that stands as one of the largest and most ambitious undertakings within Kaersenhout's practice to date. The presentation also becomes a platform for 'historische ontmoetingen', or historic meetings between women of colour whose stories are aligned, but who may not have had the opportunity to appear in public together. These meetings will be paired broadly by discipline, between two writers, two artists and two public thinkers.

The first conversation will be held between award-winning novelists Karin Amatmoekrim and Astrid H. Roemer. Both writers were born in Paramaribo and have become major literary figures in the Netherlands, recognised for elucidating the psychological and intimate lives of anti-racist struggle. Their meeting will spark intergenerational conversations across literary and social life impacted by Dutch colonial policy, with Roemer born in 1947 and Amatmoekrim in 1976. The second meeting will be staged between Kaersenhout herself, and Ansuya Blom, artists who

have changed the possibilities of art-making in the Netherlands and beyond. This meeting takes place on the occasions of their presentations with key contemporary art institutions in the Netherlands: Kaersenhout at De Appel and Blom at Casco in Utrecht, as part of the season of solo exhibitions *Het is of de stenen spreken* (*silence is a commons*). Having never before met in conversation, they take this opportunity to trace their singular pathways, which run parallel against the thick grain of social constraint. The third and final meeting will be an encounter between the Dutch-American scholar Philomena Essed who introduced the path-breaking work of examining 'everyday racism', and French scholar and activist Françoise Vergès whose vivid accounts of the island of Réunion expand geographic and historical consciousness of the global impact of slavery. This too will be a first, and truly historic meeting between scholars and public intellectuals. It will undertake the crucial work of connecting discussions within Dutch and Dutch-speaking worlds with parallel movements and urgencies in Europe and the United States.

Such a constant folding back and forth of art work and direct social engagement is the hallmark of Kaersenhout's practice, and is the ground of its exceptional energy and social relevance. As a 'communal body' the work moves constantly across art historical and aesthetic interventions, and connects to greater feminist and anti-colonial projects in the here and now. As we discussed the 'historische ontmoetingen', Kaersenhout often returned to the theme of dignity', which does not necessarily equate to 'visibility' *per se*. Dignity signals a wish that is distinct from inhabiting or obtaining the forms of personhood and recognition that have driven colonial and patriarchal worlds across the globe. Its mode is not that of the mirror, or a recognition of the same. It is rather aptly and beautifully captured in the semi-opaque black glass that Kaersenhout launches for this edition of *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner Too?* A complex composition of that which transmits light and refuses visibility. A body of repeating vessels designed for many, and which never quite becomes merely one. Staged as it is within the pedagogic space of a former school, in what is today the Aula of the Broedplaats Lely, *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner Too?* generously invites encounters of unlearning and recomposition. In the glint of its glass sculpture and the thousands of stitches that run through its embroidered textiles lies a substance of resistance that moves across time and histories, conjured as a deeply needed presence once again in the present.