

Thank you, Maartje, Christine, for the invitation to give this lecture. I feel very honored to present this talk in the context of 'Sehebeneden,' zichtvlakken, planes directing your/"our" views/sights. "Our" perspectives, whatever "we" might be. Note the plural in the title, which is, according to me, essential to it. And please forgive me "my" English, an attempt to communicate with you as an audience, but English is not my mother tongue.

This afternoon, I'll share with you my musings about perspective (s), and the interplay between deconstruction and creation. It will be an autumnal talk, let's call it a pre-Halloween get-together, in which we'll try to deal with, live with, conquer death.

I'll start this talk with an introductory anecdote, warming us up a little. "It was a beautiful autumnal morning," earlier this week. I was waking up later than usual. Opening my eyes, I discovered that the ivy covering the façade of the house opposite mine had turned a fluorescent red. It was as if it had changed color overnight. You all know this feeling of sudden awareness. It is as if minute, indiscernible perceptions, unconscious and inconspicuous, have become remarkable. The ordinary - the house opposite mine- had become notable. A threshold had been crossed: tiny perceptions gone unnoticed till that day were drawn into clarity the moment curtains were pushed aside. Opening my wardrobe I realized that I could impossibly wear t-shirts and thin blouses any longer, no cotton skirts. Cold was blowing through everything, invading like an army of unknown troops. A chilly breeze had started to penetrate each and every cell. Still warm Indian Summer days were apparently over. And yes indeed: cycling through the woods the previous weekend, we had recognized the smell of decay. Of putrefaction. Of humus and fungi. Yellowed leaves whirling around, the early setting of the sun transforming an afternoon in twilight, it all marked a definite entry of Fall.

So musing about these seasonal changes, I was mentally rehearsing the discussion about her work Maartje and I had had a few weeks before. And suddenly it was as if our talk, nature's transformations corresponding to the time of the year, and my pulling on several layers started to interact. Since wasn't Maartje actually reflecting on that interaction between disintegration (of nature in this case) and construction (my build of a protective shield of cloth)? The folds of the several layers of fabric I was wearing in the meantime not only covered my body, the textures of its many folds were also revealing what they intended to hide, a structure more abstract: that it was cold outside. A term had been applied to this turn of weather only that particular morning: Fall. Without label the receding warmth had been nonlocalizable. For me at least. I hadn't been able to reduce the cold to a definite and clear, perceivable object, acting upon it in turn. So Maartje's work in the back of my mind, I was wondering whether perspective has an object at all. Doesn't perspective have only an object until the moment we provide it with one?

The sentence with which I started this musing, "It was a beautiful autumnal morning," it wasn't mine. It is Rainer Maria Rilke's, he used it in his semi-autobiographical *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910). In this book Rilke describes the experiences of Malte, a young exile and poet (Rilke himself) living the life of a vagabond, wandering, erring, roaming the streets of Paris just after the turn of the century. Malte/Rilke is a stranger, insecure, unprotected, confronted with that unknown city too big for him. He suffers days and sleepless nights of angst and *tristesse* due his nervousness vis-à-vis that unfamiliar world: how to face it?

Paris is a city where Malte doesn't know how to live or how to die. Death and decay are all around him however: in the new public hospitals, on the streets that were populated with a growing mass of people living in the city after industrialization had taken a flight. Malte decides that the only way to understand how to live this unfamiliar life in Paris, the only way to learn how to write in Paris as well, which is why he came to the city in the first place, is to face the difficult conditions of life, including death. He embraces death, decay, delinquency. He meets the ill in the hospital and mental clinic La Salpêtrière, listening to their moaning, groaning and screams. Digging into that strange world he is afraid of is necessary in order to write poetry, Malte remarks at a certain point. He doesn't mean by that, that the *tristesse* of a world falling apart,

SEHEBENEN

Lecture by Ilse van Rijn, given at the occasion of the opening of Maartje Fliervoet's show 'Sehebeneden,' 30 October - 27 November 2016, Bradwolff Projects, Amsterdam.

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publicly showing its wounds, should literally be translated into poetry. Malte's, i.e Rilke's poetical strategy rather implies that confronting life and death in Paris, the poet comes into closer contact with himself. The world's deconstruction allows Malte/Rilke to stay true to himself: to face, death, silence, the void within himself. It is from the experience of this inner silence that poetry can surge.

Drawn against the background of the autumnal streets of Paris smelling of death, Rilke formulates his poetics, which then springs from the double bind of life and death. One of the elements on which Rilke's poetic ideas are projected is a death mask. The death mask is hanging next to the door of the casket young Malte is visiting every day. Malte/Rilke is confronted with, "The face of the young one who drowned, which someone copied in the morgue because it was beautiful, because it was still smiling, because its smile was so deceptive - as though it knew" (57). The mask is known as "The Unknown Girl From the Seine," and the intriguing thing about it, is that it smiles. Did the girl face death happily, as her heavenly expression suggests? Is it this euphoric death Rilke embraces in the mask, he who turned death into fertile, creative ground? It is precisely this mask, the images of the mask, and the writings about the mask (by Rilke and also French philosopher Maurice Blanchot), Maartje took as a starting point for the work that is here on show.

Like in Rilke's views on poetry, movements of construction and deconstruction make up Maartje's work, as I said before. Maartje's installations build on traces of what has been, on specters of the longer or less long, but often *forgotten* pasts, questioning *what* actually make up these stories, and *why* they have been ignored. Her works spring from what has been obliterated, often demolished, deconstructing and inverting the layers that build the objects and their historical accounts. Maartje's work continues where Seth Siegelaub's famous remarks relating to the art of the 1960s stopped. Regarding Conceptual Art Siegelaub noticed that what was conceived of as *secondary information* in relation to more traditional art forms (painting, sculpture), had turned into *primary information* in relation to Conceptual Art. Swapping foreground and background, documentation as well could become the work, consequently. Maartje's installations enhance the document's altered position, concentrating on the *material* of which it is conceived, *reworking* the documentation, that is. Documentation has literally been used, overwriting it giving it an alternative context. This is the reason the manuscript of *L'arrêt de mort* (death sentence, 1948) of Maurice Blanchot, that other writer writing about the death mask and the traces of death, could figure on the frontside of the invitation for this exhibition. Blanchot's manuscript has been transformed from source into an actual work.

Let's go a step further into what the dynamics of construction/deconstruction in Maartje's work could entail.

So both Blanchot and Rilke are intrigued by the mask of "The Unknown Girl from the Seine." This is Blanchot. She is, he says about the death mask, an adolescent with closed eyes. And he continues: "but alive with such a fine, blissful (but veiled) smile, that one might have thought she had drowned in an instant of extreme happiness. So unlike his own works, the mask of the unknown girl had seduced Giacometti to such a point that he looked for a young woman who might have been willing to undergo anew the test of that felicity in death." The fragment figures in an essay "une voix venue d'ailleurs" (*A voice from elsewhere* 2002), a year before Blanchot passed away. In it he refers to the years after the Second World War. Rilke, however, writes in 1910, just before the First World War. Both writers are preoccupied by the death (and the death mask), but their deaths are given other faces. They are examined in different contexts, perceived from other perspectives, that is.

As of Rilke, next to the endless images of death and life, of transience, mortality and the ephemeral quality of life - interspersed with poetical remarks, with comments on the art of writing poetry, that is - images of the city stand out. And especially descriptions of walls. Walls demarcate the routes Malte is walking, they mark and stabilize his

trajectories in the dark, banal and vulgar unknown. They thus set the very concrete limits of what one could call inner space and outer space. Or of what once were termed the private and the public realms. Those two, the private and the public, had started to mingle in the Paris of the beginning of the twentieth century. Paris had become a confusing mesh of cables and railroads that entangled everything. The city had expanded due to industrialization, as I said before. It had become anonymous. In order to survive in this vast unknown it was necessary to set your limits. The walls in Rilke's account signal that necessity. What was once the private sphere was enriched through a modern individualism at the beginning of the twentieth century. The private of that period is perhaps closest to its comprehension in Roman times, Hannah Arendt comments, when it signified a temporary refuge from *res publica*. It can certainly not be approached to the Greek understanding of the private, where those who lived "on ones own" (the Greek "idion" from which the term idiotic is derived), were those who *chose* to live not a public life (barbarians), or those who were not *permitted* to (slaves). In Greek times, privacy was public life; those escaping from it were *deprived* of something. And *idiots* at that.

What Malte/Rilke was looking for in order to write was perhaps less privacy, but intimacy. Wasn't it *intimacy* that divulged itself in the death mask? It was the sphere of intimacy that started to develop not prior to the modern age in its variety and manifoldness, Hannah Arendt continues. She points out the quest for an intimacy of the heart at the time, which had no place in public. Intimacy had to be shielded against the mingling of private and public, and their submersion into society. Intimacy had to be protected against the demands of society, where each individual was equated with a rank within a social framework ("Seen from this viewpoint, the modern discovery of intimacy seems a view from a whole outer world into the inner subjectivity of the individual, which formerly had been protected by the private realm." [*The Human Condition* 69, 70]). Rilke's is a silent rebellion against society, against conformism inherent in society. The death Rilke was protesting against was the sterile death of the city, a faceless death.

Trying to find words for the mask, describing the mask, death is given a voice, paradoxically so, Blanchot says writing about Rilke's poetical strategies. Writing in general, and Rilke's *Malte* in particular, expresses what cannot be named. Writing articulates the fact that "it," intimacy, but also writing, cannot be named: writing = death. The very need of writing, according to Blanchot, is precisely the necessity to express the unutterable aspect of language and thought.

I think Maartje's is a tentative to unearth what cannot be or is all too often not expressed as well. Once you describe something, you disentangle what you name. Like Blanchot and Rilke labeling the object a death mask. But you could wonder, together with a lot of scientists studying the mask, whether it is really a death mask that fascinated Blanchot and Rilke: it/the girl is smiling? Blanchot and Rilke naming the object a death mask, they place a perspective on it. And a problematic, perverted one, what is more. They build their own works on the deconstructed woman's dead (?) face!

"Our" knowledge of an object is channeled through sources that shield the object from our view. What do we *actually* see? Is it an object? And if so, what does it *actually* communicate? Once you invert the layers between object and documentation, the image changes color in front of our eyes. Like the leaves on an autumnal tree.

Maartje's work allows you to perceive tiny changes, transformations that seemed not to have been there before. It invites you to become aware of and create alternative relationships between parts. Dichotomies between image and text, foreground and background, object and documentation/description are redefined in *Sehebenen* each time and again. The attention to the techniques of cutting, filling and overlap, sewing and printing implicit in its installations generate an exhibition resembling a montage. It is through this montage that axes of vision are revalued. They are appropriated. They generate *idiotic* relationships, in the Greek etymology of the term, meaning fully "ones (Maartje's, "our") own." This is what, according to me, *Sehebenen* means.