

A conversation between Heidi Voet and Martin Germann

on the occasion of Beaufort Biennale 21 curated by Heidi Ballet

Martin Germann:

Your contribution "White Dwarfs and Supergiants" has certainly to do with the place where it is installed within Beaufort - Koksijde: the constellation of concrete balls literally freeze the view on the star sky within one particular moment in time – but, to start maybe with something less obvious, is there any relation in this work to the fact that you're based in Taiwan and couldn't come for installation yourself due to the - meanwhile - usual reasons?

Heidi Voet:

It is interesting that you first ask about the place that is far away, Taiwan, and its influence on the work, because it is exactly from the experience of distance and proximity that the work is conceived. While being almost ten thousand kilometers away, I was working for a place that is very familiar. A place that I can visit with my eyes closed and sense its colors and culture, and where it was unclear, Google Earth filled in the gaps as a site-visit was impossible.

This working between the familiar, a distance larger than the physical body can overcome, absence and the longing for connection are driving factors for this work.

MG:

One could therefore say that the specific situation has made this work possible, which shows that you can turn obstacles into productive material –in terms of attitude something I rather see in Asian mentality, don't you agree? However, you mentioned the familiarity of the place for yourself, so do you have a personal relation to Koksijde? Which other elements at this part of the coastline, or in this city were of your interest for developing the work?

HV:

My familiarity with the Belgian coast is more that of ingrained memories, of knowing a country and its culture from within.

The Belgian coast consists in large parts out of a wall of apartment buildings, built very close to the shoreline.

I was interested in placing the work in the dunes, in contrast with the concrete casts of the 'cultured' objects; the mass-produced balls that were used in the coastal community.

Because of tourism we have come to see the coastline as an area for pleasure and play, but in other times and cultures it is often associated with risk. In Taiwan, it was until recent mainly the territory of fishermen and the military, now beach culture is slowly developing.

You mention that obstacles can become an activator. I agree that this process might be more visible in Asia where the memory of the process is still more present. In regions that modernized earlier, for example Europe, there is often a solution at hand designed by a third person or company. Solutions are bought, not self-made. I have often seen self-made solutions in Taiwan, in which the form of the solution still indicated the problem. I have always loved the freedom in these DIY solutions, which are still connected to a tactile life.

MG:

Tactile life – this sounds interesting, so you mean in terms of another relation to the immediate surrounding? For me, by the way, now that I am back in Germany, the social life in Belgium always had a very tactile dimension, as if people are almost physically aware of managing all oppositions in their surrounding for the sake of their own security – don't confuse it with opportunism, which exists everywhere – I rather mean something else... However – but please explain your point, if you like.

HV:

What you describe about the attitude in Belgium, maybe it is related to the centuries of domination by different rulers and the poverty in Flanders in the 19th century?

With tactile life, I mean a way of direct interacting with the outside world, in a more kinesthetic way. Where problem and solution are handled by the same person or community, so that the memory of the problem is still visible in the solution. Where the surrounding is not necessary designed or conceptualized or even described in words, but physically interacted with, so that people feel empowered to have a sense of control over that surrounding. I see this as a very sensual and knowledgeable space. In the places where I have lived, Shanghai and Taipei, upward social mobility is often expressed through a detachment from physical sensations that the environment provides; the temperature and humidity of the air is constantly conditioned to prevent sweating and smell, the sick child is handled by a maid because care is burdensome. The tropical climate with its large millipedes and mosquitos, heat, sweat and mould, carries too many strong sensations, and removal from those sensations seems to equate sophistication.

MG:

...just one more issue in terms of obstacles: in the meantime, you've been in Belgium, had a look at your work, and returned to Taiwan, where you are since a couple of days. What are you doing these days?

HV:

I am in a quarantine hotel in Taipei for 14 days. Only food comes in and trash goes out, there is no other flow, no windows that open, AC that runs 24/7, a bit like being trapped in a large body.

How has working from a distance for you been? You have done several projects in Asia too recently, right?

I have been working on a new proposal, and on the selection of photos from the online performance 'In pieces and parts', which was performed in Hsinchu (TW) for the exhibition 'Margins of the city as method' curated by Manray Hsu. 'In pieces and parts' is a performance with approximately 70 non-professional performers. The work deals with the different roles we play in society and interconnectedness, through bringing people together and sharing aspects of our material culture.

'In pieces and parts' started off with the very personal, my clothes, which were remade, to then completely remove it from the personal by organizing the performances with a large group of people.

The work is related to 'White Dwarfs and Supergiants' in taking used daily objects as a starting point, mass-produced commodities which carry connotations of class, age, gender, which are then connected to much larger systems. The clothes in case of 'In pieces and parts', and the used balls in case of 'White Dwarfs and Supergiants'. The position of the casts of the balls will reflect the constellations in the sky above the exhibition site on the last day and hour of the exhibition. The relation between the work and its location/ environment will be very direct then, to be taken down soon after, when the exhibition closes.

MG:

To answer your question first, indeed - I've organized and co-organized a couple of exhibitions in Japan and Taiwan in the last months. It was of course, as for everyone, a new experience to work without real bodies in real spaces. Even if each installation and preparation process has brought up surprising coincidences and epiphanies, essential parts of human communication just disappear in this technological matrix.

Remarkably in all those drastic recent events, in a spectrum from the flood catastrophe in Germany to the sudden win of the Taliban in Afghanistan, people were notified and informed beforehand, but no-one reacted accordingly. The systems turned dumb - information becomes increasingly unreadable, the more is produced.

But before I really start ranting let's come back to your work „White Dwarfs and Supergiants“, which in accord to your description would also echo class, age, gender...

How does it deal with those identity-related issues exactly?

HV:

I like juggling with boundaries and classifications, which are applied to people and objects. If people are represented in my work, you will see a very diverse, inclusive representation; with different classes, genders, histories included. That also applies to 'White Dwarfs and Supergiants', where the variety of balls can be seen as a representation of different layers in society. The importance of one's identity in society became so clear to me through living in societies where I am seen as a 'foreigner', a status of 'not belonging', while desiring to be connected or belong. I am much keener on theories that see all life as one system. (cfr. Margulis, Lovelock)

MG:

But in how far is the work inclusive if it articulates the difference so clearly? Please tell me more about the theory of Lovelock and Margulis, and its meaning for your work in respect to remaining read as "art", and less an illustration of one particular discourse.

HV:

There is no notion of hierarchy in the work, the balls are all shown on an even plan and in the same numbers. It could have been a work consisting of all beach balls, and then those balls would be more representative of children playing at the beach. By including many sports that are played in Koksijde, I incorporated pieces of the daily life of all those other people too, without judgement or differentiating. It is also a play with scale. Working with a wide variety of balls opened up the work, so that more people could identify with it. I see it less as articulating difference, and more as hearing different voices.

When coming across the work of Lynn Margulis, I was very inspired by the idea of symbioses as an evolutionary force between all living and non-living things. The approach that life is sustained by collaboration instead of competition, throws a lot upside down in society, which I find enormously liberating. It resonated with how I see and experience living in this world. In my work, I often play with objects that are maybe not so evident together, like a vase and a wig for example, it might look as juxtaposing materials, form and meaning, but it can also be seen as revealing their connection, their shared 'history' to form a new image.

MG:

I just had to think of a quote sculptor Phyllida Barlow once said, namely: "I am still looking for the single object, the object that can exist on its own. I am still looking for this. Perhaps there is no such thing." And probably we are living in a moment of rupture, things change - for example art's function seem to have dramatically shifted in the last 30 years, from the purpose of interrupting streams of information until the 2010s to slowly become pure information itself, with all reductive consequences. The world is more complicated and ambiguous. How did your work change from its beginnings to the now - what were the largest steps or changes in direction you took?

HV:

A nice quote!

The main shift in my work came after moving to China in 2006 and the experience of living and working in an extreme, densely populated, mega city. The extent of transformation and mass production was impressive, combined with the possibilities of imagining a future. This future seemed more 'mouldable' than what was possible in Europe. It was a particularly energetic time in China where a lot could be envisioned, current politics have shifted that idea again. I started working on projects with many collaborators and was thinking a lot about the position of the individual in this massive network, like the title of a monograph I made in 2012-13 'One in Many'. I worked with the histories and value of material culture, cultural conventions, labour in relation to time, and the position of an individual in all this. When moving to Taiwan, which has a very different pace, I came in contact with the force of the (sub-)tropics, a natural environment, which I had been detached from for long. This brought in ideas which relate in a different way to one's environment. A focus on connection, interconnection and participation came to the forefront. Each place has an impact on my work, so gradually different chapters are being formulated.

MG:

To conclude our conversation, and thinking about place in a larger scale: Now that the whole world - in particular the art world - shows a new obsession with the local, after years of constant expansion in all respects - where and for which purpose do you think the "international" - might find its place?

HV:

Culture hinges on exchange, whether it is within or with the outside, both the 'local' and the 'international' involve exchange. I think that the difference lies in the scale of the exchange

and the power dynamics involved.

Europe and Asia is a very big place to talk about, but collaborations between continents can be vital spaces for rearticulating histories and emancipation. There is the tendency to call something 'international' when a dominant, mostly Western, voice has participated or has validated that exchange. For example, when an artist exhibits in Jakarta, Chiangmai and Hanoi, they are still considered a local artist. It is when this artist enters the European or American art system that they will receive the validation of being an 'international artist'. Hopefully, this attention for the local can reckon with that imbalance.

MG:

Indeed. In the end every artist is a local artist!

HV:

Or, I would say every artist is an international artist, as cultures and histories never stop at national borders.

Just as the opposition East and West is problematic, I see it rather as a fluid zone. As an ocean and land coming together, mixing and mingling, in between there is the shore that expands and retracts through the ages. Always shifting, always interacting. It is in that zone that 'White dwarfs and Supergiants' is placed.