

INTO TIME

The work of Leentje Vandenbussche
By Wouter Hillaert

What is modern art? Art philosopher Boris Groys has a surprisingly simple answer in his essay ‘Comrades of time’: modern is the art that is able to grasp our contemporary sense of ‘the present’. We look at that present in the year 2010 in a very different way than, say, the modernists did: for them ‘now’ was nothing but a passage towards a bright future. Futurists or communists wanted time to move forward, with direct pursuing action. Today though Groys chiefly sees doubt, hesitation, uncertainty. ‘We constantly want to postpone our decisions and actions, in order to have more time for analysis, reflection, contemplation. Exactly that is ‘the contemporary’: a prolonged, possibly even infinite period of postponement.’ According to Groys we wallow in a perpetual ‘now’, and prefer to let later be later. Artists or politicians do not think utopistically anymore either. In Belgium, the continuing government formation says it all. The futureless present is our all and our nothing. The earliest expression of that modern sense of permanent present must certainly be the theatre works of Samuel Beckett. It was no accident that the Irishman wrote *Waiting for Godot* already in 1948: only recently World War Two had, in a disastrous manner, revealed the collapse of the entire modernist belief in progress. Beckett’s characters do not strive forwards any longer, they keep on about their situation as it stands. Their engine is not action, it is contemplation without a direct purpose. And also the release from that impasse is continuously postponed. It is precisely what makes *Waiting for Godot*

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contemporary, a feel that was confirmed by the readers of the Dutch theatre magazine TM in 2009, when they elected this classic ‘best play of all times’

Estragon and Vladimir are rooted in an eternally repeated present.

IN SPACE

Leentje Vandenbussche too has been much inspired by Beckett’s work. *Nothing*, the first part of her diptych *All and Nothing*, was explicitly based upon *Waiting for Godot*, and was launched April 13th 2006, exactly 100 years after Beckett’s birthday in Dublin. The concept of this public performance was as simple as it was estranging: on the Korenmarkt in Ghent, some twenty ‘waiters’ were plumped down, immobile and unmoved men in a seemingly coincidental, but tightly conceived rank. The direct impact on the shoppers moving towards the Veldstraat was surprisingly strong. Some passers-by were scared out of their wits and hurried to skirt round this living waxworks museum, while others stopped and studied it for a while. Apparently, there is something unsettling about collectively standing still. Sociologist Rudi Laermans once pointed this out in an essay about loitering teens in the street: it is not so much their group identity that creates a feeling of unsafety, as the fact that they do not move. ‘As a rule, sidewalks, squares or other public spaces are designed for mobility, movement, non-stand still. (...) It is culturally forbidden to permanently or temporarily acclaim a piece of sidewalk as residence.’ Public space is important in the young work of Vandenbussche. Not only as a lap for ‘real life’, but also as a spatial subject as such. Waiting, standing still, ‘nothinging’ is not only a postponement in time, but also a ‘residing’: a relation to valid space. While modernism was dominated by the idea of a continuous line (with the highway as one of its most remarkable manifestations), *Nothing* puts a bold dot on that line. Literally: Vandenbussche carries out an obstruction of the through current, much like a (mental) dam in a river. This became even clearer when she performed *Nothing*

again that summer on Theater Aan Zee, on the median strip of the broad avenue in Ostend that joins onto the Kursaal. A strip of no man’s land, spewed out by the fast idea of progress of king car, was occupied again by absolute standing still. It reminded one of the sharp focus of a picture in which a long shutter time had reduced all through movement to vague lines. To drivers, it must have looked like a *flash*. For once it was not the standing still that was exceptional, it was all the movement.

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Nothing and All question our ‘time’ itself.*

These spatial opposites very beautifully came together in *All*, performed for the first time in Courtrai in 2010. Was it a coincidence that precisely cars were at the center of the performance? In groups of four, spectators were crammed into the twentieth century icon of modernity, to circle around in it just outside urban Courtrai ten-fifteen times in a rural loop of about one kilometer. Farm, hedge, grove, bunch of houses, field. Like a big roundabout. Farm, hedge, grove, bunch of houses, field. The continuous line, the geometry of the modernist city, became a vicious circle, the geometry of the countryside with its eternal return of seasons, of sowing and reaping. Vandenbussche could have organized a hike, or put everyone on a bike. But only in a car, her intention became clear: to show that our love of freedom for fast, ‘on-going’ movement means a restriction of choice in the permanent present. At the same time, this restriction, when the shuffling troop of cars came to a full stand still twice, and the car windows opened onto the totally silent fields, became an exploratory expedition for a completely different experience of space:

how much ‘everything’ can there be in ‘the same’. Beckett, in other words.

INTO TIME

Above all, Leentje Vandenbussche’s work remains of course an investigation into our pure perception of time. ‘We live too fast, there is too much stress,’ seemed to be her own view on the world at the time of *Nothing*. It was an obvious point, almost moralistically so. But the actual performance approached that banality about our time in a very open

manner. It happened to Beckett’s art: grazing and crystallizing, and precisely by this direct simplicity, creating space for additional interpretations. What were the waiters waiting for? In *Nothing*, Beckett is a proposition, not an impasse. ‘Duration’ as profit, ‘standing still’ as enrichment, ‘nothinging’ as a possible gate to it All. It sounds like Buddhism. But in fact, *Nothing*, in its search for the ultimate waiting, simply thinks through the permanent present, up to where it suddenly starts unsettling everything. This fierce slowing down is a strategy that for various artists nowadays is their social resistance: Lotte van den Berg, Kris Verdonck, Olivier Provily, Peter Verhelst... By ‘stopping time’ (even though only the action is slowed down), they force their spectators to see *more* instead of less. Only, Vandenbussche offers this slow food to her passers-by as a *choice*. Perception of time, consumption and freedom of choice: all this comes together in the iPod that is given to the public in *All*. Since, what can one buy with an iPod? The permission to zap everywhere, to be able at all times to

add luster to reality with the atmosphere of your choice. This device fills up, together with the mobile phone, the hole of boredom that people in a consumer society experience when they are forced into doing nothing such as in the train or at the bus stop. This ‘urge to fill’ is the core of the permanent present: we have to make good use of every moment. The iPod eases our sense of loss of time, while at the same time it reduces any overkill of external stimuli to a safe universe. Leentje Vandenbussche does the opposite in *All*: she stuffs the playlist of her iPod with sound-recordings, read in passages from books, testimonies, endless enumerations... Every spectator during the ride can choose from tens of tracks, some of which take as long as the whole performance. The pressure of this multitude is great. You are forced to choose as if from a copious buffet: do you take one excerpt in its tardy length, or do you zap through all of the tracks in a tearing rush? It is a question about your way of life itself. Whoever chooses excess on the iPod, gets to listen to a few significant extracts. While outside the countryside landscape, always the same, passes by in circles, different tracks reflect on precisely this excess: a list of results for the

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search term ‘everything’ in Google, a contemplation called ‘there is a jungle in my head’, the story of a man that tells online about all his banal doings and dealings... The iPod-composition tries to grasp the whole world – like all ambitious art – but with all its facts and

figures. Serendipity and enumeration are not only principles of certain tracks, but stipulate the organizational form of the iPod as well. It is the organization of our virtual, postmodern time in its entirety: chaotic, permanent simultaneity rather than modernist straightforwardness. We think wide, no longer long, let alone ahead. *All* makes a very sensory analysis of this, averse to all moralism. But Vandenbussche consciously confronts the present-day perception of time with the old, premodern view of time: the eternal return. Not only in the circles described by the cars, but also on tracks like ‘The circle of life’, or a sound-recording of a merry-go-round on a fair. Even an interview with the steers man of a ferry suggests an alternative: to dedicate your whole life to the same, to give up everything for seemingly nothing.

FOR TODAY’S PEOPLE

No, Boris Groys would not have problems calling Leentje Vandenbussche’s work modern art. Simple as it looks, under the skin it is so much deeper than ‘topical’ art that reflects on political-social issues. *Nothing* and *All* question our ‘time’ itself. They do so by a mutual dialogue that not many diptychs carry on in such a consistent manner. Both productions are to each other as empty is to full (or full to empty), rich to poor (or poor to rich), simple to complicated (or complicated to simple). As yin is to yang, in short. They make the circle that shows on their poster: complete and hollow at a time. You could endlessly theorize about this, but the strength of this diptych is its easy accessibility. It is immediately clear, and thanks to its interactive set-up, it has a physical impact that should not be underestimated. Everybody is in, art lover or not. To understand *All & Nothing*, you only have to be a human being, with a *nothingy* ‘a bit of everything’-life in the year 2010.