

THE WORD FOR WORLD IS FOREST

PIA LOUWERENS IN CONVERSATION WITH DUNJA HERZOG

Anybody invited to realize a project in 1646 is asked to engage in conversation with a previously unknown correspondent.

This conversation takes place via e-mail and stretches through the whole period during which the artists develop their initial idea into final results. 1646 invites the correspondent at the other end of this contact to figure his/her way through this actual process.

In trying to picture what result the artists' work is going to, such exchange can become a reflection on the amount of otherwise untraceable choices of the moment which make up to the artists' practice.

This issue is part of the exhibition by Dunja Herzog, *The Word for World is Forest*, April 8 2016 in 1646.

This artist
Dunja Herzog

This correspondent
Pia Louwerens

Concept and design
Nico Feragnoli

1646.

Boekhorststraat 125, 2512 cn, The Hague
The Netherlands

<http://1646.nl> - info@1646.nl

MARCH 17: Pia Louwerens [PL] to Dunja Herzog [DH] Dear Dunja,

Nice to meet you! I'm sorry to say I have never encountered your work in real life, but I notice when viewing your online documentation that it is very hard to determine the scale or size of the objects you make. I guess this is not a standard case of the internet photography-problem, but a physical quality of the objects themselves. Now I am very curious. Could you maybe, as an introduction, tell me something about your plans for 1646?

Regards, Pia

MAR 18: DH - PL
Dear Pia, nice to meet you too!

Happy to have this conversation with you.

Well, I like that there is confusion about the size of my work when you look at it in the net. I think it's interesting to play around with scale as it is a mode to question perspective. Not to be sure where to situate yourself as a viewer. To fall somehow out of what you used to encounter. It's a sort of a trick I use and I hope that it triggers a shift in how to look at things.

In the show at 1646 I'm trying to bring my interest in Susanne Wenger and my own work together. When Stroom invited me to work on "Attempts to read the world (differently)", my first thought was that this project would be perfect to look closer at Susanne Wenger. As I was fascinated about this woman for a while. She was an Austrian avant garde artist who moved in the 50ies to Nigeria and became a Yoruba priestess who dedicated her life and creative skills to the Yoruba culture. The images of her huge modernist sculptures in the sacred groves somehow bewitched me.

While researching on her I found beautiful drawing-poetry books of her. Two of them will be shown at 1646. It's the first time ever that they will be shown publicly. I'm very excited about that! That the poetry is accessible for a bigger audience I translated it from German into English and Yoruba. Some of the translations will also be in the show.

In the big space I plan to make an installation. There will be a lot of vines, flickering and energy capturers. A sort of reinterpretation of a jungle setting...

Soon, Dunja

MAR 23: PL - DH
Hello Dunja,

Wow, Susanne Wenger her sculptures are intense! They remind a bit of the Palais Idéal, a big structure in Hauterives, France. It was built by a postman called Ferdinand Cheval, who spent 33 years building this palace in the night, by himself. It contains a mix of very different cultures, with elements from Hinduism, gods and goddesses, poetry, a Swiss chalet, a shrine for his wheelbarrow and lots of exotic animals.

It's funny that Wenger her work reminds me of this "naive architecture", since Wenger was 1. not alone and 2. not naive, but part of the contemporary art-world (although she also seems to be distanced from this art-world). I find it very interesting that Susanne Wenger managed to combine two "beliefs-systems", the Yoruba language religion and contemporary art, which is also a belief system in a way. How do you think she did that? How do you relate to that? Is this why this project fits the Attempts to Read the World (Differently)- program by Stroom, which seems to be about paradigm shifts? Then what are those paradigms? Sorry, big questions...

The jungle sounds cool! I'm especially intrigued by the "energy capturers".

MAR 24: DH - PL
Hi Pia

I just looked up the Palais Idéal. Indeed very interesting! Apparently he took his inspiration of the postcards he delivered during the day... Very beautiful, as so much different styles from different cultures are included.

I think actually that the sculptures that Susanne did are very much in a modernist style. In 1948 she had a show in Zurich with the artist group "abstrakt-konkret" with Hans and Sophie Täuber Arp, Klee and Mondrian.

When she restored the shrines she respected the old Yoruba architectures, but then she decided very consciously to brake with the Yoruba style. As she thought that only a rupture in style could bring the actuality of the culture back to live and that just this new forms could trigger the appropriate understanding of the complexity of Yoruba culture. It's important to consider that when she arrived in the early 50ies, Nigeria was still under colonial rule and there was a massive impact of missionaries as well as Islamic influences on the Yoruba culture. All not easy circumstances for a animist culture to survive...

But that is just for her sculptures, the sculptures made by the people that worked alongside with her, where made in their own style, that they developed by them self.

How Susanne Wenger relates to a paradigm shift is in deed a very big question! I'm asking myself that again and again. There is a lot to say about and I would love to go into this topic more closely, but just in the moment I don't have the brain space to do it...

... as I'm just really hectically working on the show! In the moment I think more about where can I find more used metal poles, when the shops are not closed during Easter, how and with what I can make more energy capturers that will then match with the rest, if I should paint my vines with plant colours or not, and if a description of the house of Susanne would make sense...

I'm more in a functional and hand's on mode in the moment...

MAR 28: PL - DH
Happy Easter Monday!

Haha I'm sorry I was bothering you with big questions, I got carried away. What I really wanted to know what you find so interesting about her, or where you feel the connection between her and your work. But I will try to keep my questions a bit more down to earth: what are you working on right now? Did it work out with the shops? Or you can tell me about the energy capturers... still very curious about those...

MAR 31: DH - PL
Hi Pia

Thanks for the Easter wishes ;)!

Meanwhile I packed all the work, got some sleep and arrived in Dan Haag.

Actually I started to respond to your mail still in Berlin, but then I did not send it, as I thought that I would actually like to read something about Paradigm. Your question made me curious! I printed the Wikipedia article to read it in the plane.

But before my "reading notes" about Paradigm I want to share something that made me really feel a shift.

It was this wired feeling that I had being at the airport. I'm not a nervous nature about tense situations, but what happened in the last view month really got to me. And I'm very sad to write the following down and I don't know if it's right to do it... In January on the way form Douala to Lagos I got to know, trough a taxi radio, that my friend Leila Alaoui was killed in the Ouagadougou attack, 2 weeks ago Henrike Grohs was shot with 4 bullets in her back in the Ivory cost, a old friend of mine in Cameroon lost his brother last year in a attack in Maroua, Brussels, Paris and on Monday evening my friend Lamin phoned to ask my advise. His mother has cancer in Gambia and he would like to go there to see her, but he is afraid to go, as he might never get alive out of his country again, as since December 2015 Gambia is a declared Islamic republic, and there are some scary stories circulating. Sorry, that I write down all of that.... But all this tragic incidences occurred in the last month and happened during and alongside the preparation of this show...

And because of the accumulation of all this sad facts I had the first time a very wired feeling at a airport. Not that an attack could only happen there, but somehow while

being there I could hardly think of something else. The pain and the incomprehension of the senseless losses of friends, dear ones of friends and all the other murdered innocent people changed really my perception of how I perceive reality. Before an airport was a place that made me feel free, now it made me nervous... And that is big, at least for me. Hope it will change again one day!

But now... as South African's say: "Happy, happy thought!" Flip the page and go to something else, as reality is to heavy! Sounds brutal, but this is what I learned there... life has to go on, despite all what happened...

While in the air I was reading my Wikipedia Paradigm printout and I learned that it comes from the from Greek **παρδειγμα** (paradeigma), "pattern, example, sample", from the verb **παραδεικνυμι** (paradeiknumi), "exhibit, represent, expose" and that from **παρ** (para), "beside, beyond" and **δεικνυμι** (deiknumi), "to show, to point out".

Kuhn, a historian of science, defines scientific paradigm as "universally recognized scientific achievements that, for a time, provide model problems and solutions for a community of practitioners". A paradigm can be so convincing "that it normally renders even the possibility of alternatives unconvincing and counter-intuitive. Such a paradigm is opaque, appearing to be a direct view of the bedrock of reality itself, and obscuring the possibility that there might be other, alternative imageries hidden behind it. The conviction that the current paradigm is reality tends to disqualify evidence that might undermine the paradigm itself; this in turn leads to a build-up of unreconciled anomalies. It is the latter that is responsible for the eventual revolutionary overthrow of the incumbent paradigm, and its replacement by a new one. Kuhn used the expression paradigm shift for this process, and likened it to the perceptual change that occurs when our interpretation of an ambiguous image "flips over" from one state to another.(The rabbit-duck illusion is an example: it is not possible to see both the rabbit and the duck simultaneously.)"

Social scientists are using Kuhns phrase of the paradigm shift to "denote a change in how a given society goes about organizing and understanding reality."

It can also stand for an archetype, like in Design or it's used in cybernetics to reduce "chaotic mass to some form of order"... "To create a paradigm requires a closed system that accepts changes. Thus a paradigm can only apply to a system that is not in its final stage."

What you think about that? How you would relate our time to this quotations? What for you is a marker of this shift?

But to come back to Susanne. I think, regarding to the paradigm shift, for me she stands for living and fighting for an alternative way. She is for me the "anomaly" that I somehow need to think myself outside of the box. She is also like a bridge on which I can walk on. I can talk about a white Austrian female artist and touch though her at things that otherwise would be difficult to get at, as her life and what she did is a perfect example of how European and African histories are interwoven. And I'm very much interested in that.

About the energy capturers next time ;)!

Sorry, when this time my part got big and heavy! Perhaps don't go into the losses I experienced, I just somehow needed to mentioned it as it was and is very present...

Very soon Dunja

APR 4: PL - DH

Dear Dunja,

My condolences, I'm very sorry to hear about all this loss. It's good that you told it, when you feel something so strongly everything you do and make melts with these events, feelings and thoughts, because (as a teacher once told me): life comes first. So the things you experience now will be connected to what you make. It seems like you have a very global community around you, which is very beautiful, and what is exactly what is under attack.

I'm afraid to answer these tempting philosophical questions about paradigms because I shouldn't bore the audience with my ideas. I do like that one definition of the paradigm has to be overthrown and replaced, which sounds like a pretty drastic process, while the cybernetics definition is just "a closed system that accepts changes" which sounds pretty mellow and open-minded. I always like the idea how you can't see a paradigm while you're in it, so there could be a paradigm shift right now and I wouldn't know. How does that feel? Is it a brain-expansion like learning? Or you just feel anger or confusion, like you lost your ground? Then the current events in the world could be indicative of a paradigm shift.

I agree that it's very interesting about Susanne (we're also on a first-name basis now) how she incorporated two world views: that of a Yoruba Priestess and that of a modernist artist. The duck/rabbit hybrid! Which forms a bridge! The common ground between the duck and the rabbit here might be magic, since I always believe art to be (an attempt to) magic, do you agree?

Maybe it is interesting to know what you are going to do with the 1646 jungle. How will you connect your work to that of Susanne? How will you connect Susanne to your work?

Best, Pia

APR 6: DH - PL

Dear Pia

Thanks for the comforting words. Indeed life comes first. Just sometimes I forget...

Funny the duck/rabbit picture for Susanne, but I think it fits. Or rather, she could be a priestess and a artist, but not a artist and a priestess.

I will now try say something about the work and how it connects...

When I look at her drawings, but also in trying to understand Yoruba culture, I have the impression that it's too much. That it's so rich that I can't understand it. Very complex, multi-layered, cyclic and potent.

Somehow I wanted to mirror that. And the looping, layering and humid feeling of a dense tropical jungle served me as a image for it. And because my stays in Oshogbo did something with me in a sensory way I thought that I would like also to show a kind of energy flow. And as I am a bricoleuse and usually work with everyday trash I decided to built a sort of energy capturers... Perhaps this positing to do things with what I have or encounter is in some kind of wired way also a connection to her... also when I don't know how I should describe that now...

The other things you see in the show, a video where I scan the Odu sculpture and the description of the living room of the house where Susanne lived, are somehow attempts to understand her world better. I love the German word "begreifen", as it means to understand but also to touch, so by touching to understand something. I think I try to understand things better by being physically close to them...

oki... last day of install...
best Dunja

PL - DH

I didn't know you actually stayed in Oshogbo! How many times did you go there?

I know this sensory, physical, understanding of something, it's hard to put to words, which makes it difficult to understand your work without having seen it. I have this imagination of what the space will look like but I could be completely wrong (but it looks very cool in my head).

That's why I have some last questions, although you're probably too busy. I'll ask them anyway. You call yourself a bricoleuse: how do you select your materials, or

what is your relation to your material? Is it mostly material or physical or are the origins and meanings of the material also important? And you say you want to show a kind of energy flow, is this within the objects themselves or do you want to establish this flow through the whole exhibition? And how do you try to show this?

I'm very happy that I will see your work soon, and the big tease will finally be over.

Good luck with the last day!

Ciao, Pia

APR 7: DH - PL

Dear Pia

Today is the last day... busy indeed!

So just a very short response. Until now I was two times in Oshogbo and I think I will go again...

And glad that the show looks good in your head! I hope reality will not disappoint you!

I think the other questions I have to leave open, that I can now make the last adjustments in the space, so that hopefully there will be a kind of flow though the hole show!

Thank you so much for this conversation and hopefully we will meet for the background evening in person!

All the very best to you

Dunja
