

Hidden, not necessarily invisible

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What is hidden inside a person is not necessarily invisible to other people. That which has been carefully concealed can become evident through words, behaviour or a way of living. We read the meaning behind each other's words and deeds, we weigh them against each other, we create a sort of spatial structure out of the person opposite us, and then we take the next step which sometimes requires curiosity, sometimes courage.

The work of the actor is to probe, to examine his character's words and deeds until he understands the intention behind them, in the first as well as the second instance. Using his dramatic talent, using words and gestures that emanate from his body, he then constructs a mirror which he holds up to his audience. Hide less, understand more – that is his purpose.

Curiosity, courage and the ability to be amazed can be seen as virtues in that they could save us from ourselves.

Suppose we regard the concrete walls of the city that surround us, the walls of society, as mirrors? Suppose we ask, not what is recognisable in a public space, but what a public space recognises in us?

As we all know, modern visual artists started visiting the palace of mirrors some time ago: performance, living sculpture, 'situations', 'events', 'interventions' in which the body of the artist is the original material, have become part and parcel of the contemporary art scene.

Performance started with Dada, or even much earlier if we consider that the artist staging himself as an artist to be already a performance. Think of the glamorous photographs of the artist in his sumptuous, or for that matter, austere studio. Compare Ary Scheffer, who designed his studio as a ready-made museum, with Piet Mondriaan who made his into a research laboratory for painting. Both were spiritual spaces, which to me means that the body and the mind of the artist were equally present.

Differences between the self and the self-portrait, between staging yourself and presenting yourself have become blurred since performance established itself as an art practice in its own right.

But it is performance that is the thoroughly modern thing. With performance the body becomes material for art, accepting none of the ready-made models from art history. The body creates its own space and time, its own context.

That's why videos and photographs of performances are just documents, mere traces and nothing more. (That these documents can take on a value in their own right, is another matter.)

That context is always specific, and in performance it is always a public space, be it small or large. What happens is comparable to an exchange of aspects and qualities between artist and studio, artist and museum, artist and laboratory but on a fundamental and existential level. Artist and context become the equivalent of each other, which is to say that they exchange qualities, aspects, meanings, gestures, life-forms. In the process *both* change in significant ways. The artist goes in the direction of public space, public space in the direction of the artist. And by artist I mean the *body* of the artist.

Body and public space become equivalent and create what I like to call a field. In this field (that in time and space is always specific) shape, language, contour, image and object become material for work, as do bodily functions, images attached to the body, politics of the body.

This is the body that appears in the public space - a temporary equivalence, a temporary identification. Not the one representing the other, but it is the direct presentation of the body in the here-and-now, that ultimately eliminates the *temporary* aspects of this identification, so that *identity* is the result.

Olivier de Sagazan evolved from being a sculptor and painter into being a performer. In an interview he mentions that in a period of personal turmoil, he covered himself in the sculptural and painterly materials that were in his studio. He literally folded his own body in the materials of his work. By applying these materials and their qualities to his own body, a new field was defined, with new rules for a new game. 'I synchronised with myself' he concluded.

The body has become the canvas, the body is the model, the body is the playground. Auguste Rodin was once accused of making a mould for one of his sculptures directly from the body of his model. De Sagazan takes that quite a few steps further, as the artist and the model identify and in his performances you witness them working on and into each other.

One is reminded of Japanese Butoh performances, of shamanistic ecstatic rituals or African dance. The language fragments uttered are like the tentative, self-doubting, self-deconstructing voices to be found in the texts of Maurice Blanchot or Samuel Beckett. His performance is like the best

example you will ever see of Antonin Artaud's *Le Theatre de la Cruauté*, *The Theatre of Cruelty* - I refer to the title of Artaud's manifesto on the theatre in which he theorized his own mad passions, in which he replaced psychology with ritual, communication with fascination and repulsion and meaning with the physical reflex of the spectator.

Fascinated we witness how De Sagazan identifies his body with the water and dust from which it has already been made. The flesh in which we live, is not our own. It is not individual, it is not inalienable, it is not identity. It is public. It calls to mind the different verbs that are used in Genesis to describe how God created the world and man. The semantics of verbs like, to shape, to create, to bring forth, to give birth to, to cause, to realise and to form, interact with each other as if the actual origin of creation is hidden somewhere behind language, is beyond language. *Voir derrière* is the title of one of De Sagazan's performative acts.

De Sagazan's body is in the moment - all that happens, happens in this moment, happens this second. Bringing everything together in the here-and-now, is another link with public space, in which millions of things happen simultaneously without any author, without any scenario. (Which is not to say that there are no patterns, but that discussion is for another time). I refer you to the fact that many contemporary films, television series and novels pattern their narratives like a mosaic.

Curiosity, courage and the ability to be amazed, can be seen as virtues in that they could save us from ourselves.

Peering behind the words and deeds, what is happening there? Consider the concrete walls of the city that surround us, the walls of society, to be mirrors. However, ask not what you recognise in the public space, ask what the public space recognises in you.

Jeroen van Loon too, uses the material of his own body as material for his artistic practice. De Sagazan interiorizes, Van Loon exteriorizes his body into some of the most recent instruments that man has invented. He puts his body out there as material in analytic form, namely his DNA, better said his complete genome. He had his genome researched and saved it as a 380 GB data document on a hard disk.

In English we speak of the body of work of an artist but in the case of Jeroen van Loon we can speak of the work of the body. The artistic aspects of his project seem to implode upon themselves - it is not clear at all what counts here as artistic intention, art value or aesthetic communication. The only

communication that he seems to be putting out there, is his own body, in digital form, out there, on the market.

Once upon a time artists marketed themselves by displaying a distinctive style, a personal way of handling symbolic meanings, with characteristic brushstrokes, with patented pigments even. Art history, as a discipline, has helped enormously to inscribe these individual characteristics on our memory.

As so often happens in contemporary art, the paradox inside Van Loon's project helps us to find a way into it. Jeroen van Loon places his unique body structure in the public space of the 'market', a word that conjures up the business of stocks, shares, options or futures now under such intense scrutiny and criticism. He actually auctions off his genome.

We know that the value of artworks these days is to a large extent - in the public eye that is - determined by the art auctions and the power-play of the dealers and the collectors. Art is an exclusive commodity, on a level with Gucci belts, Vuitton bags and Prada shoes.

Indeed my first reaction to Van Loon's project placed me in a moral dilemma: could his genome be abused by opportunists and shouldn't it be protected? He should claim copyright, claim authorship! And *voilà*, here we are, in a field where the ownership, authorship, copyright of art on the internet is being discussed. We are in the public space where the privacy of your money and the integrity of your life is challenged on a daily basis.

I then realised that my reaction could be compared to the reaction of the audience, the first time they were confronted with the naked bodies of Ulay & Abramovic performing, acting out their personal relationship in public. 'This should not be public!'

What I find interesting is the change Van Loon effected in me as a result of my initial personal reaction to his project and how it reversed my position as someone who writes and speaks about art. I presumed the challenge was to extract information from the contemporary, autonomous work of art - call it aesthetic value, call it *éducation permanente*. In transforming his body into a 380 GB digital document, Van Loon challenges us to extract the artwork from the information.

At first sight De Sagazan and Van Loon may appear to follow opposite paths, however on consideration it becomes obvious that this is not the case. They play the body and its hidden places, common or not, as a field, as a public space in which everything is here-and-now.