

**How to Dare,
Interrupt, Intrude,
Fictionalize and
Scream for a Public**
An Interview with
Sarah Vanhee

Bojana Cvejić



The text below was distilled from a long conversation that took place in Brussels in November 2014. Several recurrent leitmotifs are interwoven in the account of four works by Sarah Vanhee in the words of the artist herself. Singling them out doesn't only point to the continuity of problems Vanhee persistently poses and tries to solve from project to project. More than this, they offer in this interview a performance score, which interrogates and explores a public in eclipse, and they resonate with me in the form of questions: Might fiction be a politicizing tool to exit one's privacy? Can art provide an efficient pretext to stir the consensus about art, diversity and common people? What does it mean to disturb the proceduralist democracy of experts with words dispossessed of a public political vernacular?

There is More Than One Fiction

Bojana Cvejić – Recently you realized four projects that, in various ways, decisively move out of the space of the theatre venue or any other art institution where your work has been hitherto presented. Thus *The Miraculous Life of Claire C* (2010) links the imaginary space of a novel with real physical encounters with strangers in the public space who have previously met through email correspondence; *Untitled* (2012, ongoing) involves visits to private houses whose tenants present their own choice of art works in their home; *I screamed and I screamed and I screamed* (2013) was developed with the inmates of a prison, and *Lecture For Every One* (2013, ongoing) interweaves a heterogeneous web of social gatherings behind the closed doors of various non-art-related places in a city. What prompted you to seek out and operate in another sort of publicness rather than that of the theatre or gallery?

Sarah Vanhee – One reason for choosing to operate outside the physical realm of art venues in these four works is that I experienced their limits, a sense of containment and controlling agency that I exercise under the roof of a theatre performance or an exhibition, together with their inherent, historically grown properties. I had the wish to admit foreign elements into my work, so that not everything would be in my hands and in the hands of the audience

anymore. The work becomes porous, spills over, and alterity seeps through it in a way that I couldn't foresee. Another reason has to do with the relative homogeneity of the art audience, a tacit consensus in the worldview and fields of references, which risks neutralizing even the most so-called political work.

BC – The *Miraculous Life of Claire C*, or *The C-Project*, started with the unfinished novel by the Irish writer Guillaume McGuire, which you supposedly found in a stranger's belongings on a train. Not only is the novel unfinished, but its main character, caught up in an existential crisis, is also incomplete, or as you describe her: 'an unworldly, funny woman with an absurd mind and very thin-skinned', an insecure anti-heroine in search of her identity.

SV – Two questions were my point of departure here: How do fictional characters come into being and what status do they have? Since the novel was unfinished, what I asked next was what it would mean for the author to relinquish power. As the author loses dominance, the story itself and its characters take over. This also met my inquiry into how to position myself as artist and author of my own work. I decided not to follow the authorial track of completing an unfinished manuscript by writing it up, but to become the character, Claire C, which is literally, and figuratively, in her own personality, unfinished. Claire C would then come into being through the confrontation with the 'real world', as if, one could say, each life is a collection of stories.

BC – In the next step, Claire issues a call. I paraphrase: 'I am looking for the other characters that I meet in my book. Would you consider yourself as potentially being a character in a novel? Then please get in touch with me.' The letter, which you distributed through emails, Twitter, newspaper and supermarket ads as well as regular letterboxes in the neighbourhoods in Amsterdam, addresses strangers with the question of whether they recognize themselves as, for instance, 'a man who could be from another era' or 'an older woman with a good body who often wears dark blue,

grey, brown and sometimes red', to quote two of the twelve characters of the quest. A somewhat 'odd', or as commented in the letter, 'out of the blue' invitation to imagine and cast oneself in the role of a fictional character, and solicit, by way of correspondence with an obscure Claire C, a real, that is, physical, encounter with Claire C on a bench in a park in Amsterdam.

SV – The found manuscript provided me with a framework to follow: a sequence of twelve chapters conceived as twelve phases in the life of Claire C (from *Être, Agir, to Voyager*, and so on), from which I partly derived information about the other characters.

The letter reached thousands of people, of whom two hundred contacted me. I was surprised by the amount of answers as well as the curiosity and openness of people. A selection of conversations is included in the book: the conversations also helped to construct the subjectivity of Claire. The correspondence that is included in the book attests to the process of an 'audition' for the character. Claire got in touch with many different people and finally chose to meet those who emerged as the most distinct or articulated among the two hundred that wrote to her. Although one could possibly find the link between Claire C and Sarah Vanhee if one searched far enough, most people I met didn't do this. I was amazed by their trust in my invitation's blind call to take part in something that wasn't clearly defined as fiction or reality.

BC – How did the encounter take place? And how could it be situated as a performance, a novel embodied and performed by anonymous strangers in the public space, without an audience?

SV – The first meeting I went to, obviously as Claire – I remember it was in Vondelpark – I was really afraid. But what I found immediately is that people had little reserve, and didn't come to 'play the game'. Perhaps it is difficult to convey it outside of these encounters, but Claire's character had a disarming effect. It may sound strange, but from the very first moment I went to the meetings, I was

Claire. I wasn't self-conscious or thinking about what motivated these strangers to participate in becoming a character in a novel. I was busy with an existential crisis of a person who doesn't know where to go and what to do with her life. So sitting there on a bench with an unknown person, casting them into a character of a story, was an empty sheet of paper.

BC – Characters in a novel don't have to apologize.

SV – No, they go to the essence of things, or else the books would be too long, having to describe every little practical detail. What I experienced strongly in these encounters is that people weren't acting. I believe that they were in a heightened state of performance, and maybe they would even coincide more with themselves more rather than less. Our encounter owes its intensity and our conversation its depth to the performative frame of the situation, a certain focus that doesn't exist in daily life, and it somehow affects the person. What operates in that moment is the awareness of being part of an art work which enables one to perform and fictionalize oneself. I don't mean it as a line of flight, an escape from this world into fantasy, but as a matter of lucidity.

BC – Nowadays the hunger for fiction is catered for by cinema or video images rather than by reading. Reading seems to be an obsolete, solitary practice in times when screen visuality dominates and generates desire as the motor of fantasy. How do you consider the social and political dimensions of the operation of a performance-novel? A private encounter between two individuals takes place in a public space, which will later be registered and transformed in a piece of writing. But after that, how do you account for the effect of the encounter spilling into the daily lives of those strangers? In other words, what could becoming a fictional character 'do' to them, once they exit the fiction?

SV – In *The C-Project*, the embodiment of fiction is at stake, thus replacing writing. Going to a park to meet a stranger with whom one is going to construct and perform – or

rather, become a story, implies inscribing oneself into a narrative, which treads the border between reality and fiction. If I speak from the perspective of the one who goes to encounter Claire, I regard it as an act of transgression.

BC – Do you mean that the encounter enables them to transgress, as in crossing or infringing a certain border they are bound by in their daily lives?

SV – A performed embodiment makes the question of ‘what is fiction’ more urgent than would be the case in the situation of watching a screen or witnessing a spectacle where there is a border we won’t cross. From the embodied and lived encounter ensues the question: if this is fiction, how many more fictions one could possibly live?

BC – Are you suggesting that the action of embodying a fictional character empowers the individuals to expand fiction into other aspects of their private and perhaps also public life? Does literary fiction specifically appear as a way to act upon reality in those places where it is blocked? A playful, ludic instrument to unhinge certain barriers?

SV – As a political tool, yes. Simon Critchley speaks of ‘supreme fiction’, a notion he borrows from Wallace Stevens: ‘paradoxically, a supreme fiction is a fiction that we know to be a fiction – there being nothing else – but in which we nevertheless believe. ... A supreme fiction is one self-conscious of its radical contingency.’¹

One could say that each life consists of several parallel fictions, personal and political. Let’s say it is the dominant fiction of a capitalist, conservative society we are living in now. But it is important to consider it as a fiction that we created ourselves and yet happily believe in. Who says that it is more valid than whatever other fiction? The same goes for an individual life, and regarding it as fiction enhances one’s power of imagination and creation.

BC – How does the awareness of this fiction, which I would call the contingency of a situation, help one substitute it with another one that won’t yet be a self-delusion?

SV – There is nothing of delusion, fantasy or obscurity at hand. It is rather the opposite, that it comes with a certain lucidity of seeing different possibilities and trying to work out other ways of the meaning production than the ones we are familiar with or used to. It calls for taking an active position towards our own reality. I recourse to fiction in the sense of Jacques Rancière as well, ‘not as a term that designates the imaginary as opposed to the real; it involves the re-framing of the “real”, or the framing of a dissensus.’² Fiction as a way of changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective.

BC – If we now turn to the public aspect of the operation, the encounters left traces in the form of plaques placed on the benches in the parks of Amsterdam, where Claire C met the characters of her novel. The plaques exhibit a quote from the conversation that took place on the inscribed date. Being more than a reminiscence, they also offer a Q&R code that gives access to the whole chapter of the novel online. A stranger who didn’t participate in the creation of the novel can retrace and follow the road that Clare C. took in her miraculous life in Amsterdam.

SV – The plaques propose another way of weaving a history, bypassing the dominant discourse of winners. I am interested in the writing of history that did not make it into books. It potentially opens the thread of the history of a city through a fictional character, thus giving a platform to the so-called common people who live in the city, and not just the Multatulis and Anne Franks who are commemorated by public monuments in Amsterdam.

Commoning the Art World in its Shadows

BC – *Untitled* is another project that re-hallucinates the living fabric of a city based on the encounter of strangers at the intersection of private-public spheres. A presentation of art works chosen by the people living in the neighbourhood

of an art venue takes place in private homes visited by individual visitors (or spectators) by appointment. What is the genealogy of this ongoing project?

SV – I was invited to an art biennial, and my first thoughts were about what it means for such an exhibition to temporarily land in a city, how it relates to the people living in its proximity on a day-to-day basis. Another cue was an interest in the relationship between the art object and art theory, which legitimates it as a work of art. The role theory plays in the art world nowadays contributes to the fact that contemporary art is judged as elitist by common people, especially in the recent upsurge of populist rhetoric in the Netherlands, where I was living at that time. I wanted to explore what art is to the so-called common people, how they speak about it, and whether I could conceive of their discourse in parallel to the function that theory has in the art world. So the point of departure would be an art venue as the centre of the dominant regime that prescribes what good art is. My concern was to unravel those places surrounding the art centre – houses in which people live – as a shadow or negative space of the museum.

BC – The topography of such places is relevant here, because nowadays, there are more and more contemporary art centres, or centres dedicated to experiment and research, which are geographically marginalized, that is, pushed into the poor immigrant areas of the city where the relationship with the local community is either weak or problematic. I am thinking here, for instance, of Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, deliberately located outside of the centre of Paris. In which cities and places did *Untitled* happen so far?

SV – Indeed, it is not only the physical building, but also the location that plays a role in the project in the sense of cultural policy and urban planning. The first edition was at a festival, Artefact, at STUK in Louvain, a rather rich, bourgeois Flemish city. The second one was in the vicinity of Mousonturm, a theatre situated in a nowadays gentrified area in Frankfurt am Main, where some squatted places

still remain. The third one took place around Campo, the Nieuwpoort Theater in Ghent, and the last one was around WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, located in Forest/Vorst in Brussels, a mixed neighbourhood of immigrant, poor, and white lower and upper middle-class households.

BC – How did you proceed in selecting the local hosts of the art works, and what was the question you approached them with?

SV – The process of encountering the strangers was once again pedestrian: strolling in the streets and giving letters to the people I met on the way. The question I posed to them was: Do you have something at your place which you would consider art, even if no one else would call it art, so regardless of what it would officially be considered, as art or not art? And would you like to talk about that?

One other criteria was whether or not these people were willing to receive strangers at their place, thereby letting them peek into their privacy. My preference was people who were mostly far removed from the contemporary art world as I know it, who didn't consider themselves artists, not even amateur artists (who would then probably want to show their own work). First and foremost, they would be spectators.

BC – The question goes beyond the division between art and non-art, as well as the distinction between conventional expertise and a layman's knowledge or passion. So what was there to discover in the items they chose to present; what kind of objects or things qualified as art for them? Was their function any different from the aesthetic autonomy ascribed to artworks in Western art museums?

SV – Definitely. The works they presented were inextricably connected with their own biographies and environments, their 'art' beautifully interwoven with their life. I was open to whatever they would deem to be a work of art. Everything would be okay for me, as long as it was art to them. An obvious choice were paintings. Quite a number to be found. But they would be made not only by professional or amateur

artists, but also by children, or someone in the family. They were bought or lent, or travelled as inherited pieces in the history of the family. Sculptures were chosen as well, or it could also be an architectural element in the house. Sometimes, it would be a video, too. Or a piece of handcraft. One woman regarded her small child as a piece of art.

BC – Your question reflects the nominalism in the post-conceptual condition of contemporary art as in the speech act ‘this is an art work if I say so’, the only difference here being that the utterance isn’t authorized by the art world. The same power applies to the ‘common people’, non-artists, to proclaim their works of art.

SV – Exactly. An important reference here was Arthur Danto and his thesis about the end of art, or in his own words, ‘The end of the master narratives of art. And the fact that, as far as appearances were concerned, anything could be a work of art, and it meant that if you were going to find out what art was, you had to turn from sense experience to thought.’³ Art can no longer be determined by just looking at it, but is instead the result of the discursive act of denomination. This was exactly what these people were doing. Through the act of nominating it as an art work and through their narrative account of why this is an art work, they were creating one. This raises questions similar to the ones *The C-Project* raises: Where is the art work? Where does it start – my art work, yours or their art work? For the spectator the same question applies: Whose art work is it? Where does it stop and end? What is the place of the art work presented in the larger framework of the art work called *Untitled*?

Moreover, the question does not only concern the work of art itself and its denominator; in parallel, it concerns art discourse: ‘this is an art work because’, and then a text not authorized by the art world but provided by common people in their terminology, with their references – singular and heterogeneous. There is not one voice.

BC – Visiting someone’s private domestic space is an intense experience. I remember my visit to the two houses in Forest, one of a French middle-class, middle-aged woman

with a family, and the other of a young man and a worker from Burkina Faso. I also recall the feeling just before entering these homes: you never know what you will find when you step into a stranger’s house. There are smells and noises you cannot completely avoid. There is all this apprehension about seeing things you do not want to see. In order to indulge in such an encounter, the visitor has to be a bit of a voyeur and the hosting presenter an exhibitionist.

SV – I found it beautiful to see these works in the non-neutral domestic space, as opposed to the museum, which isolates and sterilizes. The works are immersed in the noise of everyday life. But I also noticed myself, as a visitor, and this experience was confirmed by others, that the role evokes the codes of behaviour of an exhibition-goer. I would focus on the object I was shown and feel it inappropriate to look around. Even in such a situation one reiterates the protocols of museum-going.

BC – I remember that the Burkinabé man shared several handicraft objects from various African traditions, and one was a kind of machete. He passed it to me, and I looked at it, holding it in my hands, and wanted to return it to him as soon as possible. It was uncanny, as you are on a territory where no security is guaranteed in that moment.

SV – Yes, your role is unclear. Your status as a spectator is troubled, complexified. You’re not a participant in the strict sense either. Perhaps this uncanniness is amplified by the fact that the artist, the author of *Untitled*, isn’t there, and as a visitor you are left alone with a map and instructions until you ring the doorbell of the house.

BC – Although you prepared the operation in which we participate, you are not there to survey it. Unlike museums, private homes are exempt from CCTV camera surveillance.

SV – Yes, there is something clandestine about the encounter and where it takes place, which somehow applies to all of my work.

BC – Speaking of the very encounter that takes place in *Untitled*, I would say that the visitors may belong to a more homogeneous profile filtered through the art venue. For instance, a predominantly white, middle-class, educated audience in the case of WIELS and Kunstenfestivaldesarts, compared to the ethnic and class diversity of the chosen hosts in Forest/Vorst, whose affiliation with the art venue might be very different.

SV – There is always already a gap between these two sides. In my collaboration with art venues, I sometimes had to deal with the agenda of the department for audience development, and with their request for social diversification. An art venue suggested to me that I should involve those people from the neighbourhood who are less ‘represented’ in their public. Well, the sixty-year-old collector of figurative paintings working in finances, born in Liège, seemed to me as ‘underrepresented’ in their public as the twenty-five-year-old shop assistant born in Ankara; they both had never visited the art venue in their neighbourhood as they both had no interest in contemporary art. My work is sometimes mistaken for the socially-engaged art that aims for social inclusion or representation. This is never my goal per se. In this case, I would work with anyone who would answer my question: ‘What is art at your place, and can we have a conversation about that?’ The diversity of answers came with the diversity of people – the outcome of an open question, not of a strategic plan.

BC – In my view, *Untitled* successfully critiques the hegemony of the art world by affirming another order of diversity, which needs no social or political representation under the paternalistic terms of art venues and their well-meaning, socially engaging policies.

SV – I believe that art institutions are wrong in their judgment of the lack of diversity. Their programmatic attempts to integrate differences are dangerous, as they annihilate a certain scope of heterogeneity. Thinking along the schemes of social and cultural stratification often means maintaining them and reducing a plurality of voices to a number

count. I’m interested in art as a space for meeting, speaking, thinking, for potential dissensus.

Most of the participants would see the neighbourhood art centre as one of many possibilities in their cultural life. What I found quite refreshing was when one of these people would tell me: I go to the spoken-word evenings, my friend has a band, my mother paints, and so on, and yes, sometimes we go to this contemporary art venue. Somehow they were able to unite all these into art, and their vision of art was very open, and not dogmatic.

BC – It confirms the thesis about the birth of the modern museum as an instrument not only to educate but also to instil public order, a device to monitor citizenship through aestheticizing behaviour, as Tony Bennett wrote.⁴

SV – Rather than being resentful, many people had an attitude of indifference toward the importance of art venues: ‘Let the clan remain... I have my other, my own art experiences.’ They can’t be subordinated to the hegemony of the institutionalized art world. Maybe we should not be so surprised about the fact that not everyone wants to go see what the predominantly white, higher-educated, middle-class men have selected for us as art?

To come back to the idea of fiction, I think the art institution proposes one possible fiction – albeit a very important one, often a beacon or a point of reference or departure – but it is just one of many fictions about art.

Screams from Behind the Wall

BC – How did you come to work in the prison for *I screamed and I screamed and I screamed*, which was presented as a performance and an installation in the visual arts biennial Contour in Mechelen.

SV – Contour usually takes place in different places and at various sites in the city, as it also serves to market the symbolic capital of Mechelen. In 2013, the curator decided to focus on four places: the cathedral, the school, the prison and the exhibition venue. All of them shared the same

disciplinary regime that operates on the division of authority between the dominating and subordinated forces. Usually I don't work by commission, but as for a long time I had had a wish to work with men in prison, this proved to be a good occasion.

BC – What were your initial thoughts about prison?

SV – First of all, it is one of the institutions as shaped by modernity about which I think, 'How is it possible that prisons still exist?' They have turned out to be ineffective, a consensus shared by both prisoners and prison directors. Two results of imprisonment attest to it: first, in prison, the main thing that prisoners learn is how to become better criminals, and when they exit, there is no way for them to be reintegrated into society. Prison doesn't serve the convicts; it isn't for 'them', but for 'us' as a guarantee of our own 'security'. Furthermore, one could also wonder if putting people behind the walls against their will is an act of violence in itself that also violates certain rights. This doesn't mean there are no people who are potentially violent toward society and who might be better locked up for a while so as to protect other people from them or protect them from harming themselves. But most people to be found behind bars do not fall in this category. They come from underprivileged backgrounds where there is a tradition, family history and practice of criminal behaviour as a way of life – people who never had a chance to go to school, for instance. This is something I would like to pursue further after this project: criminality not as a legal but as a legitimate, a viable way to live one's life.

Among other sources, one important reference was *Discipline and Punish* by Michel Foucault,⁵ which traces the genealogy of penal systems in history, going from the early customs of public hanging and torture to the development of a disciplinary system as we know it today. What struck me while reading Foucault was how the body disappeared from view in the course of this transformation. The early practice of public torture featured a spectacle of the body with a participation of the audience based on a direct confrontation with the convict. I am not suggesting that this

carnal spectacle was better than the penitentiary today. All I am saying is that the prisoner has become a legal matter, their body, and with it their personhood, has been evacuated from public attention. Prisoners are reduced to numbers. And my interest was to re-establish the connection from human to human, and let the subject who is behind these walls re-emerge. Revealing the face and the body seemed delicate, since it also discloses the identity, which the prisoners prefer to hide from public view. This is where I began to think about the voice, which, through the hearing and imagination it elicits, is some kind of raw matter, even more connected to the body than the visible body itself. In our visually dominated culture, we spend hours with our face, with which we present ourselves to the world, but very little attention is given to cultivating the voice in everyday life. The voice and its singularity as an identifying power are underexplored.

BC – Listening and hearing are underestimated in the current distribution of the sensible.

SV – Yes, and in my view, the voice is a richer source of information, or identity vehicle. I likened it to fingerprints. The prisoner must leave fingerprints as an index of his identity. The voice is also singular and could function like that: there are no two voices that are identical. Apart from certain exceptions, the voice has not been standardized yet, it does not fit measurements.

Apart from the perception of the voice, another element was the scream. Screaming is like breaking the law. It is something you don't do, it is not socially accepted.

BC – In several interviews you mentioned that screaming is a controversial gesture in some contexts. It is regarded as a breach of public order. In the simplest terms, it is read as a sign of pain or anger or intensity. You also evoke the muezzin's call – the invisible chant from a tower which is closed-off to nonbelievers.

SV – My initial idea was to make a choir of screaming men according to certain religious rituals, or as an appeal

made by the human from the prison to the outside world. This was, among other sources, inspired by reading Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, in which he describes how people arrested in broad daylight mostly didn't scream, and that there are different reasons for their being captivated in silence.⁶ They would think it was a mistake, they still trusted the law, or it became such a strong bureaucratized action for which the first instinctive response was not to scream and alarm other people around you that you are being done an injustice.

The directors of the prison accepted my proposal without having understood the degree of engagement it entailed. I also understood that the prison in Mechelen was, in actual fact, a jail — a place in which the arrested are detained for an undetermined period. They are locked up in cells, with no plan, and they have no perspective about the duration of their imprisonment.

BC — Jails are places where law, or even perhaps society on the whole is suspended.

SV — The prisoners of a jail are the lowest citizens on the ladder. They don't know yet what the ordeal will be, how long they will have to stay there. It can be one week or three years.

I encountered many different obstacles in this project. First of all, screaming was not accepted by all inmates. It is by all means a provocative gesture toward a prison population, and it divided it into two camps: to scream or not to scream. Is it cool, or is it sissy, is it something that you do or don't do?

When I would meet them, we would of course have this dialogue. But very soon the conversation would diverge into what kept them busy most of the time: questions of justice. Not only in a legal sense, but in the sense of a moral feeling: they were constantly judging if they were treated with justice or not, whether they were just or unjust themselves. The men I met all tried to present their own goals in a comparison with others, trying to show to me, as an outsider, that they were a bit less bad than those other ones.

BC — There must have also been people who already felt too humiliated to want to cooperate.

SV — There were also people who just wanted to stay in their cell and be left alone because they didn't trust the situation when an artist comes from the outside and wants to do something with them. How the project was communicated to them was unclear as well. It had to go through so many filters. So I explained it to them again and again. It was very transparent.

BC — When I think of resistance and obstacles you must have met on the way, then I imagine it as an endless series of locked doors that need to be opened.

SV — It is literally doors, and also functions embodied by people. But the harshest confrontation was with the bureaucratic kind of resistance from the staff who just wanted to do their job. It was another contemporary Western legal example of the banality of evil: the one who does his job does only that which he thinks he has to do as his job. There was only one person who helped us: the librarian, who was some kind of 'mama' for those inmates, who often came to confide in her, and she would semi-legally smuggle books, and so on. But she helped us not because she was convinced of the project ('could screaming be art?') but as a gesture of benevolence.

BC — Prison is, then, the place where there is the least good will to experiment, as if everybody operates as a mindless automaton. So to disrupt their routines is much more difficult. I can imagine that would be the same in a school, or in a hospital. What defines disciplinary institutions is a rigidity of rituals, protocols, rules, norms. And then you stumble upon a person who is willing to make it possible.

SV — That is almost a function in the dramaturgy of the preparation of my project: to find that little weak element or spot in a seemingly impenetrable environment that will say 'yes', 'I trust you', or 'I'll take the risk', 'you can enter'.

BC — How would you summarize the battle with the prison staff and inmates during the working process?

SV — Soon enough my original plan to train a choir of inmates over two months became a joke, a tragicomedy of errors. After the first session, already two people fell out, one because he was freed, which is something you can't be unhappy about. Because of the lack of communication within the prison, attendance was irregular — who would show up, and in what numbers. I figured out that it would not be possible to build a choir, so I adapted my way of working to shorter training sessions with a voice coach. We actually became experts in giving half-hour screaming sessions. As the training sessions were fruitful and intense, and people became quite collaborative in their approach, I began to think of other ways of evoking the scream. The idea of the choir became inadequate, because the inmates gathered together do not make up a group. They are just a bunch of individuals, and moreover, screaming is also individual. The quality of screaming is lost when voices are glued together. Hearing one voice at a time has a much stronger effect. Some people approached it technically, some worked from emotion, and others focused on language. Over time, a special bond was built with some of the inmates, who became experts in screaming and in encouraging the others to join. In general, art as a framing device helped once again: the moment a sound technician joined the rehearsals and brought out his equipment, the atmosphere changed and the inmates were more concentrated.

BC — The presence of the professional!

SV — And his equipment. Until then we asked them to scream towards the wall, but suddenly there was a microphone and they knew that the microphone would transmit their voice.

BC — After you undertook the process of a mission proven impossible in this jail, how did you decide to collect individual screams as 'donations' that would become part of the installation in the biennial?

SV — I still clung to the idea of transmitting the presence of the human beings in the legal role of inmates behind the prison walls. So instead of collecting their fingerprints, I collected their screams, of which some were exceptional. I knew

from the outset that a live performance with the inmates screaming in a choir would not be possible. Still, I organized a live performance where I myself was screaming the text that recounts the project, while the collected and recorded screams were played back. We did it in front of the prison wall, knowing that behind these walls some of the inmates would be listening to the screams, and some of them would also scream along. The neighbours were watching sceptically from their balconies and the police came. There was an audience to attend our performance, and what I verified in this act of transmission was that some members of the audience reported that they too would like to scream. So in a way it transcends the image of the prisoner who screams toward a metaphor of 'we are all prisoners of a society regardless of whether we are standing in front or behind the wall.'

BC — Or as Foucault defined the shift from the disciplinary to the society of control, whose subjects internalize the disciplinary mechanisms of the prison, school, hospital et cetera. Speaking of the installation, how does it relate to the project and who does it address?

SV — The installation is a document representing the project: a twelve-hour long projection of the image of the prison wall, where the passage of time is visible only in the changes in light. A score of screams can be listened to through the headphones, and the text in which I explain the project in its process and all its difficulty is handed out.

But what really matters is the process and the performance. As with many of my projects, there is something semi-public and semi-private in this situation as a heterotopia. What happens remains among the people who took part in it, and there is no third party that could observe or mediate it to others. Invisibility can contribute to impact.

Words Dispossessed of a Public

BC — How did you conceive *Lecture for Every One (LFEO)*?

SV — I recall being discontented about the insularity of the intellectual and artistic community I am part of. There is

no fundamental disagreement about politics, and it often feels like we are preaching to the converted. I had a wish to encounter another range of difference in views, ideas, and lives, and seriously engage with a heterogeneous kind of living together. What would it mean to confront my concerns with an outside that potentially disagrees or resists these questions. Another thought concerns language: how to speak to and be heard by those who are not usually part of my world? This is where the title suddenly cropped up: *Lecture for Every One*. What would it be like to make a lecture that could be understood by everyone? Everyone not in the sense of all, like a TED talk that you could just put online, but every individual one, gathered in an assembly.

BC – One definition of discursive community is a certain linguistic closure of those who share the same assumptions, concepts, rules and norms. But the reason why ‘every one’ is spelled here as two separate words emphasizes difference and equality, where singularities are addressed.

SV – Every one implies belonging to *the* multitude, each and every one addressed as being part of everyone. An assembly and encounter of different bodies.

BC – The performance of *LFEQ* takes place at closed meetings. Why did you choose the social gathering as the stage for such a lecture?

SV – When I prepare *LFEQ*, I observe the city in terms of how people move from one association or assembly to another get-together. I believe there is an incredible potential in all people gathering on a daily basis for various reasons or concerns. One can think that anything could happen whenever different people come together. Although these meetings are often strictly structured according to an agenda with time pressure, there is always the possibility of disturbing it, and taking the meeting elsewhere. As a stranger, I opt to intrude in those places – and my preference goes to those who could perhaps be most hostile and resistant to my words – where my presence can create an outside, make the inside of the meeting public.

BC – Until now, you have disturbed about three hundred meetings with the performance of *LFEQ* in Brussels, Vienna, Berlin, Tallinn, Athens, and so on. What are the criteria by which you choose the range of assemblies?

SV – In every city we draw up a list of available meetings, which range from professional meetings in various disciplines to nonprofessional meetings based on education, leisure, cultural background, or religion, from governmental organizations to NGOs. The meetings vary on the level of the hierarchy of organization (from CEO meetings to those of employees of a lower position), but also topologically, whether they take place in the centre or the periphery of a city. Working with a network of agents who help us access the meetings, I and my collaborator seek to *read* the city through a selection of groups who potentially represent ‘everyone’. A diversity of class, age, profession, ethnic and educational levels of citizens who currently assemble. Among the meetings that I or another performer disturbed were the air force of the Belgian military, a Congolese Mass, a sales meeting at IBM, a meeting of a lobby group of Nestle, a brass band rehearsal, an assembly of the entire sales team of a huge department store, a training of a basketball team, a board meeting of a mushroom collectors’ club, a free masons’ meeting, a meeting of taxi drivers, an elderly people’s home, a fraction meeting in the EU parliament about transport in Europe, a meeting of the IT department of an elevator company, a Rotary club, et cetera.

BC – Could you describe the situation of the event and its protocol?

SV – There is usually one insider of the visited group who provides the entry into the meeting, but who doesn’t know in advance the text of the lecture. For the other persons in the meeting, my appearance is totally unexpected. So *LFEQ* is like an intruder: I enter the meeting, my contact person briefly introduces me, I say the text. The words are exactly the same for every meeting. The text that I speak is about fifteen minutes long, but it can also become longer if there is discussion or if people pose questions. Sometimes it lasts

more than an hour. I'll answer them, but my aim isn't to have a conversation with them. Nor is it a monologue of an individual. I don't really present the words 'for them'. It's more like I spread them 'amongst us'. The words that I bring are like a porous object that resonates into the space, among the people. After having ended the text, I leave right away.

BC – The situation reminds me of a critical point that John Dewey made about the crisis of the public in representative democracy. Since it is based on representation and delegation, society is run by experts of whose knowledge the citizens are ignorant. Dewey was advocating the renewal of a 'great community' in the U.S. based on face-to-face dialogue.⁷ Speaking and looking into the faces of those who are in the position of making decisions on behalf of others carries the weight of appealing to their responsibility.

SV – Indeed. The text criticizes this sort of top-down 'expertise'. And the 'experts' who happen to hear the text know that the 'non-experts' hear exactly the same words. As such, it addresses every one in their responsibility, without ever using that term though. As Roberto Esposito has it, community is nothing but the relation – the 'with' or the 'between' – that joins multiple subjects. The text speaks to the people present. My status as an outsider ignores all possible representation.

It isn't only the representative democracy that lacks this face-to-face dialogue, it is also the virtual internet culture in which bodies are missing. For instance, a lot of reunions take place via Skype, which wasn't the right mode for me to say the text. More than addressing faces – which are certainly very important, and I noticed how much I returned the kind of gaze I am looked at with when I am in those meetings – I address the different bodies present there by also naming them. The biopolitical dimension of democracy consists of the presence of bodies as vehicles of subjectivity. The liveness of the event and my own presence are crucial. Because not only am I interrupting their meeting; I can also be interrupted.

BC – What is it that you say in a lecture for every one? What is the common ground upon which every one can be addressed, since the text is repeated almost verbatim in every instance? And how does one speak to every one?

SV – Indeed it is 'a lecture for every one', and not 'the lecture for every one.' What was most difficult about *LFEQ* was to write the text, choose the form of address (do I speak in the first person, do I address 'you', and, as I discuss it in the lecture itself, how do I conceive of 'we'). As the common denominator of myself as a stranger and the group in assembly, I opted for the way of speaking of a human to a human, as well as a citizen to a citizen. The common context is that we are citizens of Western liberal democracy in capitalism in Europe in 2013, 2014, 2015, and so forth. My preoccupation in the lecture is an inquiry into the state of the common in our societies. Part of that are the problems I implicitly invoke in the anecdotes I tell: living together (which is literally the Dutch word for 'society', *samenleving*), the crisis of representation in democracy, immigration, possessive individualism, fragmentation of social life, and so on.

At the beginning I ask the three questions that mirror the taxonomy used automatically in the West, a kind of tacit mutual levelling-out: 'Do you think you have more or less money than I have? Do you think you know more or less than I do? Do you think that you are stronger than I am?' It is a way of disarming oneself by saying let's just do it and be past that kind of measurement.

BC – At a certain point you also cast yourself as a contemporary subject, perhaps a citizen dispossessed of the public sphere. I quote: 'I am stupid, paranoid and powerless. I am over-rational and unreasonable. I am constantly under surveillance and I feel unsafe. I am ignorant about how to live with people who are not like me. About the future I am cynical. I think I am unique and original but I don't dare to stand out from other people.'

SV – It is indeed a description of a contemporary citizen, a certain diagnosis of the current state of affairs in Western

public sphere. However, it isn't a personal confession, but rather a statement of someone, anyone.

BC – There are four notions you emphatically affirm: care, freedom, love and power. They connote humanist values that have become quite problematic.

SV – These words are comparable to what John Cage described as the sounds that wore off after WWII, and that it took him a while to use them again.⁸ In the post-ironic times we are living in today, these words are similarly spent. I realized that I felt that I missed them. So I wondered about how I could reinsert them in the public space, in some way, rescue and re-appropriate them like one reclaims a public space one has been dispossessed of. So that's why I say 'let's try them out', although it is difficult. If I reclaim 'care', then I have to distinguish it from the consumerist and commercial sense of bodily care, and speak about caring about each other on an interpersonal level. At the same time, this doesn't exempt the government from its duty to care for its citizens through public services. Or when I affirm 'freedom', I try to disentangle it from its negative definition. We are taught about freedom by being reminded that we are 'unfree', and that we have to free ourselves from insecurity, diseases or problems, or that freedom is a matter of material acquisition and the logic of multiple choice. Freedom has nothing to do anymore with abundance or empowerment or imagination.

BC – You also link freedom to disobedience: freedom to refuse, to be angry and to disobey. What about love, which was most difficult for me to grasp?

SV – I deliberately avoid a precise definition. Instead, I consider love as a force against fear, or against closing oneself off to something perceived as a real or imaginary danger. Love becomes, as Critchley suggests, the willingness to be touched in the first place, as in an ethical reflex before judgment, a way of saying 'yes' that accepts the uncertainty of the consequences of the opening. It could be compared to those people who accept to let me present *LFEO* without

knowing what I am going to say. Furthermore, love is something that you don't discuss with your colleagues or in any kind of professional meeting.

Finally, there is power, which I don't define. It is something I leave for the people assembled there, and it is the word with which I leave.

BC – Twice during the lecture, you interpellate your audience with the words: 'We've just created a moment together. this is a moment before. We are before.' Thus, you call for their awareness of their here-and-now presence together, as well as the interruption that your presence incurs: an interruption of the protocol of the meeting, the efficiency with which the agenda must be fulfilled, procedures implemented and decisions reached, roles played.

SV – This is a moment of suspension and caesura, of silence in situations where there is never silence. I literally seize the meeting by taking words to speak. It always de-configures the course of events that would usually take place. The atmosphere changes abruptly, the faces and the bodies become much more present not only to me, but also to each other. Our contact person, whom we call the day after, reports on the effects of the lecture. People start speaking to each other, or a discussion starts, even a dispute in some cases, or people fall silent or become emotional. In any case, in more than a half of the instances, it turns out that the meeting doesn't continue as planned. But I am never witness to this. The reason why I leave is not because I don't want to give them the opportunity to provide feedback. It's exactly because I want to leave them the space amongst themselves and not created by me. I don't own the moment.

BC – Your interruption isn't an abduction, or a colonization of the situation. You interrupt it and you leave.

Notes

- 1 Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 91.
- 2 Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 141.
- 3 Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 13.
- 4 Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).
- 5 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Vintage Books, 1995).
- 6 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (London: Harvill Press, 2003), p. 13.
- 7 John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press, Ohio University Press, 1927), pp. 126–127.
- 8 John Cage, 'Lecture on Nothing', *Silence* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 117.