

Twenty-seven December twenty-eighteen



Photo by Jan Lietaert

A conversation with Sarah Vanhee: "The dark is not a place to be afraid of" by Lies Mensink (/EN/news/a-conversation-with-sarah-vanhee-the-dark-is-not-a-place-to-be-afraid-of-by-lies-mensink)

Before the screening of her film *The Making of Justice* in Veem House, Sarah Vanhee shows me how fiction can reframe realities, why we should actively embrace the not knowing, and should not be afraid of the dark.

As Veem House, the 100 Day House, afterwards, approaches 265 days of darkness; the words of Sarah Vanhee sound reassuring: "The dark is the place where everything is still possible. I think darkness is not a place to be afraid of."

Sarah Vanhee is an artist whose interdisciplinary work sheds light on what in society is kept hidden. In her stage performance *Unforetold* this is the dark itself; in her performance *Oblivion* it is the waste we create and leave behind; in her film *The Making of Justice* it is the imagination of seven long term detainees, convicted for murder. Sarah: “What is visible is always what is part of the dominant regime, so in the hierarchies of power what is ‘out there’, is what the dominant power wants us to see. Since I don’t necessarily agree with what the dominant power says we *should see*. I’m interested in what is kept hidden from us or what is not being shown.”

Sarah wants to move beyond the dominant realities that have been imposed on us, and does this by using fiction: “I believe that fiction is not only what allows me as a person, but also others, to reinvent themselves and reinvent society.” Sarah makes this visible in her film *The Making of Justice*, she takes the audience behind the walls of a prison, we see seven convicted murderers working on a crime movie script with Sarah. In *The Making of Justice* we notice that although the detainees have been locked up for a long time, their imagination remains free. “Fiction serves as a tool for emancipation so to not constantly coincide with the biography they have already told and reiterated over and over again. Through fiction, they can reinvent themselves.” Sarah Vanhee uses fiction similar to how French philosopher Jacques Rancière sees it: not as something opposed to reality, but as a tool to reframe the real: “For me art is a place of transformation: you can transform yourself and you transform a world. But in order for that to happen, you need to let go of what you already know.” For Sarah, fiction comes from a place of uncertainty, sometimes even a place before language. “It’s really like an active embracing of the ‘knowing not’, I would say.”

“Sometimes I don’t even know what reality is”, Sarah says, referring to her performance *Unforetold*, which takes place almost in complete darkness. Sarah worked with ‘seven small beings’ on stage, aged from seven to nine. “We worked with darkness. Where everything is possible, but what is possible is also what we do not know *yet*. We would have to work with another intelligence, which I would connect to ‘the magic’. The magic that children of that age are still very much connected to, but as an adult you’ve lost your connection a little bit.” Moving to a place of uncertainty, Sarah chooses ‘unlikely’ experts - *unlikely* from the perspective of dominant society. “I like to doubt who the experts are,” Sarah says. She works with murderers as experts in writing a crime scenario, and as society usually speaks of *little children* in terms of less, Sarah sees them as more and approaches them as

‘small beings’. According to Sarah, these very young beings can still imagine ‘what is possible’ in the dark. Whereas “adults can no longer imagine it, being oversaturated as we have been overexposed.”

Sarah’s performance *Unforetold* would have fitted perfectly into the narrative of Veem’s theme last year, *The future is dark which is the best thing the future can be by Virginia Woolf*, however, she says, she also feels very connected to this year’s theme *Staying with the Trouble*: “I feel that we live in a time in which we need engagement, where we need to show up. Stay with one another and indeed be in touch with what is difficult, and find ways to overcome it instead of looking for escapes.” Yet,” she says, “we should also remain close to what is flowering and what we fondly give our energy to.” Sarah explains: “I’m reading a lot of literature from indigenous nations and what I learnt from them, is this movement of turning inward.” She immediately adds that she does not mean turning inwards in the sense that Dutch philosopher Thijs Lijster uses it, in *De grote vlucht inwaarts (The Great Leap Inward)* in which one turns inwards at the expense of collective action. But “to turn inward in order to find out what needs nurturing and what you want to dedicate your energy to. There is for instance a lot of lamenting on how bad capitalism is, which keeps us fragmented. There are also many positive movements and uplifting stories.” *Staying with the Trouble* for Sarah doesn't just literally mean *that*, but also to stay “with what is flowering and what we fondly give our energy to.”

Maybe turning inwards is also turning to darkness. Sarah: “We live in an age of overexposure, where we are constantly exposed to lights from screens. We are constantly out there. You constantly have to put your insides out, to perform; to be someone. I feel that takes us away from this turning inwards, towards what it is we want to grow in.”

After a hundred days in the light, Veem will turn to 265 days of darkness.

Listening to Sarah speak, is like a welcome bed time story: “The dark is a place where everything is still possible. I think darkness is not a place to be afraid of. I think it’s something we need to go back to...

To find each other.”
