

Visitor Account of Leonor Antunes' *An Open House*

This text by artist Gwenneth Boelens follows a newly commissioned performance by artist Leonor Antunes, *An Open House*, inside Aldo van Eyck's Hubertushuis on 10 December 2016. The building was designed by Van Eyck in 1973 as a home for mothers in difficulty, and is characterized by its strong use of colour. The performance engaged with both the architecture of the building—reopened for the occasion before its impending renovation—and its past relating to the artist's ongoing interest in twentieth-century architecture and design.

I made a mental note: “the string is tensioned, important.” Artist Leonor Antunes’ gesture in the Cygnus Gymnasium in early 2016 confused me. In a peculiar, non-functional space next to the entrance, a single elastic golden thread was hooked over small nails and pulled tense, tracing a subtle line across the windows. Was the golden string design meant to add a decorative layer to the narrow space? Or did it add a sense of actuality to the Brutalist school building because of the string’s tension, which would presumably grow slack someday? Or did it put forth a proposition of flexibility and translucence to the otherwise massive concreteness?

We can follow Antunes’ elastic line with our bodies and eyes like we do our writing. We can conceive the path merely as a new surface, at a glance: textual, musical, graphical.¹

When preparing a loom for weaving, one of the challenges is to keep the countless threads at the same tension and separate. The bundles of threads can easily lose the order you have dictated and become a chaotic intertwined mess. Antunes’ effort is singular, concentrated... it anticipates the necessity of beginning again, if the tension were to drop.

De-velop, envelop.



Somewhere I read that relations between sound and objects, feelings and thoughts, develop by association; language attaches to and envelops its referent without destroying or changing it—the way a cobweb catches a fly.

—Susan Howe, *The Quarry*, 2015

Hubertushuis, Plantage Middenlaan, Amsterdam. I have passed this building countless times, it’s on my route from my home to the inner city. The building is a silent, but present landmark. It has changed over the years I have spent passing by it. I remember school kids stumbling around out front, a friend telling me he worked there as a *handvaardigheidsdocent* (handicrafts teacher), parents bringing their toddlers to daycare replacing the clumps of school kids from before, and then vacancy. It’s disquieting... when their inhabitants leave, buildings rapidly become marked, unattended shells.

On Saturday 10 December 2016, an audience was invited into the Hubertushuis for the duration of one hour. Walking through an empty building, one is drawn to the windows to look outside. To see the particular outside, framed. On that day, I felt pulled towards the back of the building and was touched by the faded colouring of the metal, by the plants and the light, while my eyes fell upon others looking.

Since the other is familiar, I guess I will find my way to her, to the balcony outside, later.

But the glass keeps (safely?) separating us. The subject of my gaze shifts from the framed outside, the metal stairway leading to a large plant reservoir, to the other, standing there, outside. Another woman. I see other women. Some caught as though in a film still. I continue through the empty rooms—over the tarp-covered steps—separated by thin yellow ropes before closed doors.

Preserved.

The floors are mouldy, disintegrating. Small wooden planks move as I cross the room. The women are an abundance of colour. Their clothes remind me of dancers I have seen at rehearsals.

Are they lost in thought? Are they making a point? It is a strong image: the women, the silence, the unity of shared undisturbed looking.

I recall the headline: 19 October 2016: “Women throughout Latin America are saying #NiUnaMenos (Not Even One Less).” And other phrases from articles: “Thousands of protesters marched in Buenos Aires and other Argentine cities on Wednesday afternoon”; “What they wanted, they said, was a cultural change”; “On average, one woman is killed in domestic violence cases every 36 hours in the country [Argentina].”

Or am I witnessing a time capsule linked to the architecture that surrounds me? I haven't looked up the history of the building, or Antunes' work yet. If this is a test I will fail.

I note: wooden doors of different widths; very narrow ones lead to small balconies. Special corners have been made for indoor apertures allowing raking light to fall into the hallways. Narrow coloured tiles underline the doorways. Coloured wooden panels here, there. There is movement in the building, not much logic, not much mirroring or similarity within the spaces.

•

Listening now, it's as if a gate opens through mirror-uttering to an unknowable imagining self in heartbeat range.

—Howe, *The Quarry*

Like in a house of mirrors,² the women appear in the maze-like structure of open and closed windows and doors, the glass panes obstructing the parts of the space we cannot get to. We anticipate its dead-ends, but nevertheless feel caught. As a woman, I can't help feeling like I encounter a mirror-image of myself. Time and again.

The image repeatedly unreachable, and never truly overlapping, occupying the same space, in agreement.

I am unable to motivate myself to complete unpleasant but necessary tasks, procrastinate on matters relevant to work. I tend to lose important things, ... documents. I wish I didn't lose personal things, documents. Because they are personal.

—Hanne Lippard, *Ariel 2.0*, performance at Bold Tendencies, London, 2015

Adolf Loos' Villa Müller has no closed spaces. Instead the levels of the floor vary slightly, creating unconventional openings and angles from which to view other spaces and family members. Similarly, the floor plan at the Hubertushuis is emphasized by Antunes' placement of women directing their gazes here and there, giving prominence to our shifting roles between spectator and actor.

It brings to mind the title of a book I never finished, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*.

All seeing, I think, is painful. [...] The photograph is the crossroad of this pain. Every photograph is a little sting, a small hurt inflicted on its subject, but even more: every glance hurts in some way by freezing and condensing what's seen into something that is not.

—James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back*, 1997

We are permitted to look at the women. As though watching something on screen, we feel undisturbed, with one intriguing exception: our gaze remains unanswered.

I look it up: Hubertushuis, Plantage Middenlaan, Amsterdam. A temporary home for single parents (mothers) and their children, 1973–1981. In the late nineteenth century a home for so-called *gevallen vrouwen* (fallen women).

I read that Aldo van Eyck, the architect, in conceiving his building brought in many oppositions and connections. I notice this.

Van Eyck based his design on the idea that architecture must make human activities possible and should encourage social interaction. This idea was a reaction to post-war functionalism, which in practice often resulted in sterile, cheerless buildings. [...] According to Van Eyck, he chose one colour for the facade, namely “the rainbow colour.”³

Later, on a project developer's website, I read the “850m2 top location, modern monument with complex floor plan” will soon be redeveloped into a thematic business centre: “Concept development theme center gaming-industry.”⁴ The prospect fills me with worries, whereas the women have settled in me.

- 1 I was reminded of a talk by social anthropology professor Tim Ingold, *Touchlines: On Seeing and Reading as Ways of Telling* at Kunstverein, Amsterdam, 2015. “Of both images and texts, it has often been claimed that they cannot, simultaneously, be seen and read. This tension between seeing and reading, I argue, results from the twin assumptions (a) that vision entails a retrojection, from world to mind, of what has already been projected from mind to world, and (b) that reading entails a disarticulation and re-articulation of graphic elements that have first been articulated on the page.” See <http://kunstverein.nl/2015/06/a-talk-by-tim-ingold>.
- 2 “The origins of the house of mirrors stems from the hall of mirrors in the Palace of Versailles. Upon a visit to France to discuss colonial land agreements, Peter Stuyvesant arrived at the Palace of Versailles and gazed upon the hall of mirrors present in the palace. Peter (or Petris) became determined to bring this amazement to the newly founded colonial city of New Amsterdam, of which he was governor. Peter Stuyvesant’s House of Mirrors was founded in 1651 and he charged one Dutch gulden for admission.” See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House_of_mirrors.
- 3 The Amsterdam Centre for Architecture (ARCAM) keeps a lemma on this particular building from which the quote above was taken. See www.arcam.nl/moederhuishubertushuis.
- 4 See www.refund.nl/hubertushuis.html.

Gwenneth Boelens lives and works in Amsterdam. Her work has been exhibited at: MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA; Kunst-Werke, Berlin; Ludwig Forum, Aachen, Germany; Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne; and others. She attended the Royal Academy of Art, The Hague and the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam.