

A Cut and Paste Conversation:

Renée Turner, the De Geuzen Foundation, and Jason E. Bowman

De Geuzen is a foundation for multi-visual research which was established in Amsterdam in 1996 out of the necessity to create a forum in the Netherlands for critical inquiry, reflection and production with regards to visual culture. De Geuzen has three core initiators, Riek Sijbring, Femke Snelting and Renée Turner who operate as a collaborative art and design team which creates context specific projects. Its intention is to promote an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural dialogue that opens up new positions and perspectives with regards to visual culture. De Geuzen's practice includes curation, art, design and programming in the form of symposia, exhibitions and educational workshops. Its goal is to initiate situations where visual practices are viewed and understood as an integrated social process.

Jason Bowman: Now that I've seen your mission statement I want to ask a blatant question: I know what that means but how does it function on an organisational level?

Renée Turner: Our structure is hybrid to say the least. De Geuzen as an entity has three different capacities. It houses studios and a place for public events and we also operate as an agency.

De Geuzen came about through a mixture of events and interests. There is a thin line between hybridity, flexibility and confusion and when we began, we were closer to the latter. Riek, Femke and I studied together and during our post-graduate studies we worked in various configurations, curating exhibitions, creating installations and visual interventions. Although our affiliation with each other was not formalised, the roots of our current collaboration began there. Things became more solidified when I started renovating a space in Amsterdam with two other artists, Marco Cops and Cesare Davolio. As I was reaching the end of my studies, I thought perhaps different agendas could be combined and accommodated by the space. So the building's interior has been constructed with flexible usage in mind.

De Geuzen has separate yet interdependent functions and I guess it would suffice to say that the culmination of all these functions constitutes the foundation as a whole. The overall rent of the complex is covered entirely by renting out four individual studios. Not all occupants share the public face of De Geuzen but we see them as integral nevertheless. It's a mix of both public and private. When the agency is hosting a public event, two of the studios are emptied out and a dividing wall opens to create a larger public space.

JB: So what are the immediate benefits offered by the structure of having a foundation which incorporates an agency and a studio complex?

RT: There are many benefits, but most important is the fact that we, as an agency, do not have to depend on government funding for the use of our space therefore we have a guaranteed forum. Our programming can shrink or expand depending on our financial situation. Although the Netherlands has more funding for the arts than most other countries, we felt this flexibility was an indispensable safety mechanism.

JB: The agency practices both at its own location and in other contexts. Is the space also responsible for generating the necessary income to fund your projects?

RT: No, we don't generate a profit from renting

the space, and our entry fees tend to be pretty low. For programming and projects, we have to fund raise for operational costs.

JB: I know that you have recently started to receive funding from the Mondriaan Foundation but that previously you were self financing. How has the receipt of state funding altered the practice?

RT: In the past we really relied heavily on donations of time, energy and money from our friends. And I have to stress that there was not that much money circulating among us. After a while however there were limits to the amount of begging, borrowing and stealing that we could do. Plus all of these negotiations took time and much was left up to chance or luck. Because we had a desire to push our projects further and find ways of bringing in broader audiences, soliciting funding from the Mondriaan was one way of preserving a degree of continuity in our programming.

JB: Has the receipt of Mondriaan funding changed the way you operate in terms of pace?

RT: Yes, to a degree because when you receive state funding, you're held accountable to an external body. Before our only accountability was to ourselves and our audiences. There was a sort of an intimate and immediate response in terms of programme planning. Now with subsidies we have to plan and apply in advance. I would be lying if I said that does not affect our practice. However it has also opened up other possibilities which were not previously available to us.

JB: Beyond these structural elements, De Geuzen represents itself as a foundation for multi-visual research. Can you expand on how you understand your practice as being researched based?

RT: Well, first of all let's incorporate the term 'multi-visual research' into the equation. It plays with the very tenuous relation between art and theory, there is a degree of contradiction. But at the same time it sets a tone for our activities. The three of us are visually trained. Femke is a designer and Riek and I are artists. Our individual practices have always included a visual means of acquiring and disseminating information. Admittedly, our definition of what that means is amorphously broad and manifests itself differently within each of our projects. And from the beginning we wanted our projects to be investigative, similar to laboratory or field work.

JB: Do you mean in terms of art experimentation?

RT: Not really, experimentation seems like a bankrupt term in relation to art now. It is a word that is often used and seldom actualised. Basically through the matrix of research we wanted to allow for rehearsals. It has been our aim to create a space where the unfinished or speculative could be tested with audiences. Outside of academic structures, there are very few venues, if any, where this can happen. And although playing with this notion of research, I think we have always understood our work within the frame of art and therefore we don't necessarily look towards achieving the sense of conclusion which other forms of research may be held accountable to. Despite this, it is very important to develop methods of analysis within our practice, a kind of internal and exter-



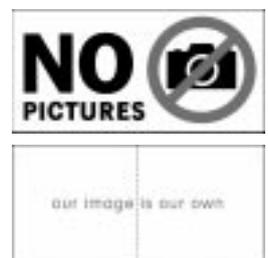
nal check. We have to continually scrutinise our own work and process with an eye on how our projects resonate beyond our own interests.

JB: Can we move on to talk about De Geuzen in practice? The first work of yours I saw was 'The Walk-in Reader'.² While many of the other works in this exhibition were centred on architecture, your work seemed much more expansive and escaped the limitations in representing urbanism solely via architectural or design vocabularies.

RT: Yes, thematically the exhibition looked at the processes of urban transformation taking place in the Netherlands. And I think Hou Hanru was struck by the post-Koolhaas generation and their almost utopian drive to address social problems through design. For us however, it was crucial to shift or contextualise the debate on buildings and urban planning in order to look at the social forces and networks that have and continue to shape the city of Amsterdam.

JB: So how did you assume this position within the context of an exhibition?

RT: We set up a kind of temporary resource. It included an archive where books, videos and internet URLs were collected around related themes ranging from the ways in which people make themselves feel at home in the city, to how so-called illegal or black economies function within the structure of mainstream economies, to how people map out their living environments, circumscribing the communities they belong to. Everything we gathered was made available to the public and there was a photocopier where people could copy books for free. Besides the more librarian ethic, we programmed weekly events based on our selected themes. The events took on different forms from round table discussions to tours through the city. We involved a variety of people from diverse backgrounds and specialisations, ranging from Joke van Kampen, the chief editor of the homeless newspaper in Amsterdam, to a social geographer, Dr. Rob van Engelsdorp Gastelaars. And with every event, more information was amassed and added to the archive. For us, it was an act of gradual social contamination. The space soon operated as a point of convergence where people returned or became regulars.



JB: One of the things which really struck me was the way that 'The Walk-in Reader' did not attempt to become responsible for accuracy of representation.

RT: It was never our ambition to be accurate, in fact we tend to do a lot of dancing around issues. Our approach rarely aims for a direct hit so to speak. 'The Walk-in Reader' was a forum, a resource and a podium that not only addressed various social networks but became one, a nucleus of activity within the exhibition.

JB: This notion of being or activating a nucleus of critical activity seems to punctuate the identity of De Geuzen generally...

RT: Yes, I think it has always been our aim to create sites where various social texts intersect or even collide.

JB: In terms of the exhibition at De Appel, De Geuzen's work seemed to be simultaneously servicing the context of the exhibition and, for me, also problematising how social contexts were represented by many of the other works.

RT: It was never our intention to provide a discursive bridge between the other works and the public, but there was an element of wanting to contextualise the larger debate which Hou Hanru was raising. So in that regard we did occupy the very ambiguous position of facilitation.

JB: I wanted to ask you more about your relationship to facilitation. In Britain facilitation by attaching interpretative or pedagogical methodologies to art works within the extant ideologies of the museum, gallery or theatre is developing into a burgeoning service industry. To me, many of the British forms of facilitation seem to be opaque—in that there is frequently a loss of critique or a tendency towards homogenising audiences. You appear to be traversing this by assuming a position as a research based foundation which also practices agency and is consequently able to develop and promote a less conclusive and less reductionist sensibility...



tial to enliven interest. Ultimately there is something disturbing about using discourse to legitimise or explain art, and reductive is the right word, in that neither art nor theory benefit from such a model.

JB: But at the same time much of your practice does appear to be looking at the relationship between art and theory and consciously advocating discourse and debate.

RT: The relation is there but not the same as the standard institutional use. Here I want to go back to the idea of multi-visual research and what that could mean. Between the visual and the verbal we try to establish a series of relays, a kind of dynamic exchange between the two.

JB: De Geuzen also produce 'visual objects' as part of these internal relays such as the pop corn funnels, made from the script, which you distributed when you screened Guy Debord's 'Society of the Spectacle' at De Geuzen or the series of take home quotes. Are they used in some sense to orientate the more conceptual or theoretical elements of your practice?

RT: In a strange way your question reiterates the perceived divide between these practices and I think that they are more mutually bound through the relays we establish. We use visual elements which are playful and others which are instrumental and on some occasions they also surf beyond the rational, therefore traversing between what is conventionally referred to as theory and practice.

JB: So is there any common aim in your uses of such 'visuals'. To me they seemed to be centralising around notions of distribution. This seemed particularly apparent when you mailed out 'the inventory' after 'The Walk-in Reader' closed.³

RT: Distribution is an undeniable aspect and so is accessibility or creating multiple points of entry.

JB: Do you mean in a directional sense?

RT: In a way yes, but rather than a sign it operates as an evocation. For instance, the modular glossy red table at De Appel was designed for multiple uses; it gave the space an area of concentration and continuity.⁴ The design sets the tone, acclimating audiences. Depending on the arrangement of the table in the room, people were enticed to either sit and privately read and view, or it was

clearly arranged for discussion and direct encounter. On other occasions the visuals took on a performative role, activating audiences. At the opening of 'The Walk-in Reader' we served a cake with the map of Amsterdam printed on it. The result was an almost carnivalesque atmosphere with people scrambling to cannibalise their own street.

JB: This role of evocation seemed to change with your more recent work 'Our Image is Our Own'?

RT: In the context of 'Midnight Walkers and City Sleepers', an exhibition which commissioned artists to work in the Redlight district in Amsterdam, we were initially invited under very specific conditions to be a part of the debates surrounding the show⁵. However, we were conscious that it may be more appropriate to employ and deploy other strategies and skills within this context. One of the things which is problematic with that area is that most of the time it is defined by its tourist industry, the sex industry, which is of course the most visible. We didn't want to reiterate that very clichéd or surface perception of the area and yet we didn't want to evade the omnipresence of that industry. For this reason we decided to initiate a collaboration with The Red Thread (De Rode Draad), the prostitute union which occupies a significant position both physically and socially in the area. As three women, we were also intrigued by their operation as a prostitutes' rights organisation and what that entails.

JB: When you're working in socially engaged practice many of the invitations to work are placed into the context of a thematic exhibition for a limited period of time and within the auspices of the curator's selected themes and sites. This format may appear to also relocate the artist as tourist.

RT: I completely agree on both accounts. It seems that if you take on social issues there is a perception that there is an easy transferability from issue to issue, one week a critique of the museum the next queer theory. For clarity of argument let's separate, however crudely for the moment, two bodies of reception. First there is the commission by the curator or curators. Then there is the second context which is the concrete social or physical environment about which the commissioner has asked you to work. By second here I don't mean to distinguish these realms hierarchically. And I guess our attention is often directed towards that second context, the one that reaches far beyond the premise of the exhibition.

JB: So, it seems that you're suggesting a reconceptualisation of how exhibitions are used and received...

RT: Well, I can't really address this as a general modus operandi but through the format of 'Midnight Walkers and City Sleepers' we were able to seize the opportunity to work with The Red Thread. The exhibition offered a means of entry and we were able to reroute both intention and attention. And no doubt, the inevitable question of longevity arises. Certainly it would be ridiculous to hop from theme to theme according to the curator's choice. If social engagement is a part of an artist's agenda, it is important to ask: How and should we sustain that connection after the exhibition, or temporary highlight, has taken place? In terms of this particular collaboration, it was very clear after our initial meeting with The Red Thread that our involvement would have to be long term in order to come to grips with the complex social and economic dilemmas these women face. More importantly we would need



RT: I think it's important to look critically at the trend of using discourse as an interpretative or translative device. My suspicion is that institutions want to become "user friendly", levelling the productive tension between art practice and discourse. Undoubtedly this desire comes out of a very real pressure to attract broader audiences with the hopes of securing funding. However, I am not sure if eliminating complexity, or using discourse as a process of distillation for art is the way to attract broader audiences. In fact, the complexity and controversy raised through the friction between art and theoretical debate has the poten-

time to examine how those issues reflect upon the position of women in general.

JB: I frequently view exhibitions or commissions of socially engaged practices as 'host contexts'...

RT: Host is really the appropriate word, but rather than being a guest, I consider our relation to be somewhat parasitic.

JB: So did you find a way of successfully limiting the overall objectives for the context of this exhibition whilst recognising the more long term process orientated objectives. Also how did this initial engagement manifest itself in a particular product?

RT: After our first discussion with The Red Thread a very practical need emerged. On the windows of the rooms in which the prostitutes stand there is usually a sticker reading "No Pictures". The Red Thread has become the distributor of these stickers and quite simply they had run out. We discussed the possibility of a kind of message of solidarity among women from The Red Thread and De Geuzen. But that is not an easy task because the union is not actually looked favourably upon by the proprietors of the brothels. Our solution was to come up with a sticker with the no pictures icon, a simple image with the camera with a red slash through it and the words NO PICTURES. But on the back we had silk-screened in florescent pink the text: OUR IMAGE IS OUR OWN. The slogan, normally the focus in politically oriented work, in this case is disposable. In order to use the sticker the slogan must be split apart and peeled off. The slogan becomes a moment in use, a temporary comment or thought, a way of incorporating a degree of fragility into a political situation. There is another element which we haven't discussed with regards to the exhibition which is the hijacking of funding which went on. We were able to redirect attention and money.

JB: One of the issues which seems to continue to confront socio-specific art practice is that it needs to traverse a degree of suspicion from certain partners with whom it wishes to consult or collaborate. How did De Geuzen strategize in relation to this?

RT: It was made very clear that although we are all women, there is an element of exoticism or tourism which cannot be eradicated. And I think it

was important to acknowledge that dynamic from the beginning. At the same time, although none of us have been prostitutes, there was a connection in terms of being women concerned with the ability of women in general to have control over their bodies and representation. Most importantly, women should have the right to set the perimeters of the use of their own bodies. It is fair to say that prostitution is at the edge of female representation, but it is nonetheless a condensed or concentrated formulation of those issues relevant to all women. Their position raises the very fundamental question of where the border of "NO" is drawn. Also, I think it is important to say that the relation with The Red Thread is not one way. We were interviewed in their magazine "Blacklight" which then recontextualises our own practice and connects us with a very different audience from that of the exhibition.

JB: I see how this element of detour or rerouting operates outside of the De Geuzen space, but how does that element function in relation to events held at your building?

RT: In our own space we set the perimeters of our projects so detour is not the word I would use because we establish the route. Our building provides the space for things to move or be processed at a slower pace, there is more of a laboratory feeling where controlled research, or reflection can take place.

JB: But in some sense the space also advocates a facilitatory role. Recently I saw four presentations here on the theme of 'the real' which were all inconclusive and constituted presentations of research in progress by artists, essayists or cultural critics⁶. How do such events influence the direction of De Geuzen?

RT: Through events held in our space we are able to broaden the base from which we work. By this I mean, we use our events to expand and push our own research plus we extend our collaborative capacities. Our space is relatively intimate and our programme format is closer to symposia which allows us to establish an active and interactive dialogue between speakers and audience. The question which has now arisen is how to extend that research further, beyond the immediacy of an event, and towards extended invitations to participate, confront and inform.

JB: I know your organisation like many in the Netherlands at the moment are developing their funding applications for new projects and organisational restructuring. Can you say something about how De Geuzen plans to capitalise on its existing research base and how this will influence its parallel activities?

RT: Our aim is to make follow-up publications to our events, not in the sense of a catalogue or documentation, but as a continuing forum, an extension of our enquiry. Through generating printed matter and creating a web space our goal would be to tap into other audiences who might challenge the limits of our thinking. In fact, these forms of distribution and access might well be the accountability check that I spoke of earlier.



Notes

1. The Mondriaan Foundation is one of the largest funding agencies in the Netherlands offering both structural and project support for Dutch cultural organisations and initiatives.
2. 'The Walk-in Reader' is the title of an installation made by De Geuzen for 'Unlimited.nl-2' an exhibition at De Appel which was curated by Hou Hanru.
3. Following the exhibition, De Geuzen mailed and distributed a booklet listing the entire contents of 'The Walk-in Reader'.
4. De Geuzen collaborated with Apolonija Sustersic in designing the space of 'The Walk-in Reader'.
5. 'Midnight Walkers and City Sleepers': on location in the Red Light District, was a multi-site art event in Amsterdam which was curated by Hedwig Fijen, Maria Hlavajova and Theo Tegelaers.
6. 'The Mediated Image: Testing the Surface of the Simulated, the Virtual and the Real', was De Geuzen's most recent in-house project.

Renée Turner is a Texas born artist, based in Amsterdam and is one of three core members of De Geuzen. Jason E. Bowman is an artist who is currently undertaking the Scottish Arts Council's Amsterdam Studio Residency and conducting a series of interviews on organisational frameworks of contemporary arts practices. These extracts are from conversations which took place in June 1999.

