



improve the experience of proximity with our interpretation and imagination. The idea of 'experiencing the other through media' intrigues me. Seen from a psychological point of view, this brings the reference to virtual reality to mind.

How does the use of new media influence our ideas and definitions of the 'real' and how does it influence our concepts of what a 'real' experience is? Computer simulated environments<sup>1</sup> are nowadays a part of our reality and virtual environments have been used in different disciplines for research, therapy, trainings and gaming. The use of the virtual space offers the possibility to experience- and revisit realities. Scientific researchers have examined that our automatic body responses react in computer simulated environments as in real settings; an interesting example is the virtual version realized in 2006<sup>2</sup> of The Stanley Milgram Experiment from the 1960's<sup>3</sup> We consciously know that a virtual world is not real but some parts of our perceptual system take it for real; some part of the brain doesn't know about virtual reality.

In my view the process of exploring unknown bodily realities lies at the base of role-playing. The identification processes evoke bodily experiences and at the same time we're aware that we are travelling virtually exploring 'the other'. This conflict is the core of my interest in the medium film.

For the work *If someone is going to play my part* I asked temporary inhabitants of Detroit to participate. The interview part of the work is deployed as a working method to come closer to ones mental world and as a tool to generate a possible 'script'. The participants couldn't prepare or rehearse for the list of questions. They have been asked to reflect on their identity without referring to the city context. Although the work examines the human condition and identity in general, I'm considering at the same time an 'American identity'. I'm questioning how this cultural identity is reflected through the work and how it could be read. How do we see, wish and imagine ourselves as individuals? Which group do we feel associated with? One question of the interview was: "do you identify with a certain social group?"

When I look at both our works, I ask myself if and how we can 'read', how the roles we play in daily life, are determined by the different social structures and human conditions?

SF: I very much like Anneke's statement "some part of the brain doesn't know about virtual reality". It is known that we can practice certain moves by simply imagining them, rehearse them in our brain so to speak. In that respect real and virtual would only help to distinguish geographically if something is taking place inside or outside the brain.

If this difference seems to be of no importance to our brain, why is it to us? Why is it important that a play is a play and not life, even though we all know that we are always performing? Maybe it is because otherwise we would lose the possibility to see us as well as others from a distance, we would lose the possibility for the dialogue over a certain distance.

IL: Trying to bridge (geographical) distance in an attempt to reach exchange on a profound level is strongly present in both our practices. The working methods and the processes, more than anything else, form the core of the work. Dislocating yourself and challenging collaboration by 'role-playing' and 'taking stage' connects our artistic strategies.

The method of role experiments and staging reminds one of theories on role-playing like E. Goffmann formulated in the 60s and 70s of the last Century. The sociologist Goffmann proposes that in our civilized societies we all are constantly performing roles. The roles are scripted by our cultural heritage, by collective and individual histories but most of all by the group we're part of, or wish to belong to.

I agree with Anneke that it is very interesting to investigate how individuality and cultural identity relate to the roles we create. We can detect a tension between the individual and the social or collective roles. Comparing both our works, role-play is applied very differently. In Anneke's work the participants are defining their roles (their individuality) through the work, while in *Ochered (the rehearsal)* the roles are unmistakably scripted by the text and my directions.

1. Like computer games and other computer simulated environments.

2. Experiment lead by Mell Slater in 2006, a virtual reprise of the Stanley Milgram Obedience Experiments, Slater M, Antley A, Davison A, Swapp D, Guger C, et al. (2006), PLoS ONE 1(1): e39.

3. The Milgram experiment is a sociological experiment that sought to determine people's propensity to obey authority.

In the video piece *Ochered (the rehearsal)* nine young amateur actors partake in an enactment of an adaptation of the novel 'Ochered' (Engl. 'The Queue')<sup>4</sup>, written in 1980 by Vladimir Sorokin (1955, Moscow). Sorokin, a member of the Sots -Art group, wrote the novel about people queuing in hot summer Moscow in witty and colloquial dialogues. No descriptive sentences appear. From a fragment of this novel I composed a theatre text for nine roles. I furthermore staged a 'rehearsal' for this 'play' in the auditorium of Krasnoyarsk Museum Centre. With this project, which we embarked on rather spontaneously, I not only intend to engage with the 'criticality' or the 'wittiness' of Sorokin's writings, but I also test the sustainability of the mentality that shines through. Sorokin thumbs his nose at Socialist realism.

My objective was on one hand to pay a tribute to the author. At the same time, I wished to 'stage' (like in a child's play) a fiction, which playfully explores the Russian and maybe general human 'soul' and condition<sup>5</sup>. How does one rehearse 'waiting' and 'desire'?

The actors in the video are of the same young and 'critical' generation as Sorokin was back then. I posed questions: How much of a Russian collectivist mentality is actually detectable in 'Ochered'? How is it performed by young people of current times? Can this novel be seen as Sorokin's 'cinema vérité', and/or a metaphor for true Soviet life, or even the human condition in general? Staging a situation wherein young people are enacting utterances and figures of former times, is a rather traditional method to produce an artwork.

Moments of 'falling out of their roles' and 'mistakes' kept occurring during the recordings. I embraced these as productive and valid instances.

The rehearsal, where you 'try on' a role, brings me back to Goffmann, and to Anneke's piece. The 'roles' in *if someone is going to play my part* are not so much rehearsed, but rather constructed, while the work unfolds. Responding to the questions and by acting for the camera, the men obviously take a step outside their 'selves'

On the level of our engagement with the people we work with, our approaches resemble each other. I'd say our works also meet on the level of a shared interest in 'the unspeakable', 'the self'. We research ideas about how 'self' sometimes unconsciously slips in through the gaps of language and performance. The methods Anneke appropriates derive from sociology and psychology, whereas I work from the idea of the 'theatre play' and the 'fictional characters'.

SF: It somehow strikes me that by starting out with the question about distance as part of the word "Ferngespräch", quite quickly the conversation brought up issues within the methods you apply in order to approach a seemingly distant issue, only to raise questions, which are close to most humans. Slipping into different roles and persons we can create a (physical) difference by expanding our self, introducing maybe something like a Ferngespräch or Long Distance Call to ourselves that helps to define what we call identity.

Already the Greeks were convinced that the experience of certain moods through actors on stage would lead to a catharsis - a cleaning of the mind - and thereby had a positive and healthy impact on the individual and on society.

ADB: I am examining the process of identification and role-playing in my work. Like I stated before, I think that we can try to 'experience the other through ourselves' by our imagination and interpretation. In my work I'm using different 'formats' such as: a children's play in *Breathing Space*<sup>6</sup>, a film scene in *Running and Falling/Actress and Stuntwoman*<sup>7</sup>, a business training in *Playing Undetermined Roles*<sup>8</sup> and a casting situation in *If someone is going to play my part*.

4. 'Ochered' (Engl. 'The Queue') 1984 of Vladimir Sorokin. First edition: Syntaxis, Paris 1985 | English translation: Sally Laird 1988. The background is the time (80s), when Soviet consumption was the flip side of the American one: people had enough money to buy, but goods were scarce. In dialogues, the reader is told about an enormous line in Moscow streets, where people join to have a chance to buy ... something. It is never entirely clear what. The novel is all lightness and wit. In his fidelity to quotidian street conversation, Sorokin offers exactly the realism that would never be permitted in Soviet Union. By the excellent use of the trope Social Realism of USSR he succeeds in critically exposing its fraudulence. Vladimir Sorokin was a master in playing the fool in confrontation with the Soviet regime.

5. The Russian identity is often classified as being overtly spiritual. Historians and philosophers discern that the Russian 'soul' derives from an agrarian life and mentality. With their devotion to mother nature and their consistent belief in higher spiritual structures the Russian '(farmer) soul' seems perfectly fit for collectivism and communism.

6. 'Breathing Space' (2001): four students of a Medical Faculty have been asked to participate in a setting of the children play; 'Playing Doctor'.

7. 'Running and Falling/Actress and Stuntwoman' (2004): an Actress and Stuntwoman are practicing for the same film scene.

8. 'Playing Undetermined Roles' (2003): a business trainee; the roles of the six participants take on are not prescribed, but develop out of the group dynamics.

These staged 'formats' could be seen as accepted ideas about certain 'social realities', and as a way to define, interact, engage and commit (or refuse) to a role<sup>9</sup>.

The method of role-playing and improvisation could be seen as strictly theatrical but have been applied in scientific research as well.

*If someone is going to play my part* is questioning the concept of the 'actual' and the 'ideal' self. E. Goffman speaks about the 'self' and our associated self:

"The expressive cohesion that is necessary in performances shows a fundamental discrepancy between us human to human 'self' and our associated 'self'"

In the investigation of the discrepancy of the 'self' and our associated 'self, I've chosen personification as a point of departure. The whole work is based on the idea that every person can formulate what an actor would need to know in order to justly perform that person. By responding to the questions of the interview, the participants gave descriptions of their inner worlds. The questions of the interview are based on Method Acting conventions<sup>10</sup>.

In the installation *if someone is going to play my part*, the viewer can perceive the other by listening to audio descriptions and by viewing performances on video. The two media cannot be perceived simultaneously. The different ways of delivery and presentation evoke a crack in how we perceive the participants.

Talking in terms of mental processes, I would like to come back to the idea of improvisation and experimentation. Improvisation as an experimental method has been used in different disciplines in various forms to discover, 'regain' and play. In my work the use of improvisation could be seen as a research method. This also seems to be the case in *Ochered, (the rehearsal)*. It comes to mind that 'taking stage' is an invitation to participate. Cultural, historical and economical 'issues' can be addressed and examined. The set and play could be seen as a kind of 'open source'.

SF: At this point of our conversation I am also feeling a bit like staging and rehearsing as in a role play called conversation, carefully placing one word after the other to approach the unknown end.

Maybe the interesting thing is not if something is real or unreal - since that's probably a matter of interpretation, but that there is a space between these two conditions<sup>11</sup>, allowing the shifting between different states and roles.

IL: The slipping in and out of roles by the artists, the interviewer Sybille and by the audience is striking indeed. The way in which we play roles and move between distances implies a dynamic between the unknown and the known. Like I proposed in the beginning, when we intensify the dynamics between those poles we nurture a condition, which enables an examination of the world around us. For me, that's when art emerges.

I'm tempted to investigate Gadamer's theory "Hermeneutik findet zwischen Fremdheit und Vertrautheit statt" that Sybille brought up. The impulse to tell stories is a very strong one I think.

So far we talked about our methods and strategies, and I proposed these as the core of our works. We were only marginally talking of the content as such. In an interview I attended recently, the artist got the question: "what is being told through your work?" Although this question might seem a bit lazy, I consider it now as a challenging opening for the public conversation at the opening. What 'stories' are we telling? What kind of content do we wish to deliver? And do we want our works to provoke specific interpretations and thoughts? And which thoughts?

9. Erving Goffman, 'de dramaturgie van het dagelijks leven/ schijn en werkelijkheid in sociale interacties', teams, p. 95

10. Method Acting is a technique of acting introduced by Stanislavsky in which the actor recalls emotions or reactions from his or her own life and uses them to identify with the character being portrayed.

11. According to Gadamer (Gadamer, Hans-Georg. Truth and Method. New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), only by the presentation and representation (music, a play or art in general) of a meaning to someone (a performance) - which is always an interpretation - (new) meaning is produced. Interpretation here refers to the interpretation of a work of art by the performers as well as to the interpretation by the spectators who attend the performance and must also interpret the piece. Important for Gadamer is that the experience of meaning and the truth experience require the presence of an interpreter. There is a famous sentence of Gadamer according to which "Hermeneutik findet zwischen Fremdheit und Vertrautheit statt". - "In diesem Zwischen ist der wahre Ort der Hermeneutik." Hermeneutic takes place in the dynamics between 'strangeness' and familiarity.

Exhibition **Ferngespräch** (Long Distance Call) March 8 - March 30, 2012

Das Esszimmer - Raum für Kunst, Bonn(DE)

An email conversation between Ine Lamers, (IL) Anneke A. de Boer (ADB) and Sibylle Feucht (SF)

SF: Even though many people use email and Skype to stay in touch with friends and business partners in far away places, nobody uses the term "Long Distance Call" or the German "Ferngespräch" anymore. Both terms actually sound quite outdated and make me think of black and white movies from the 50's and the cold war. Nowadays all we do is call, mail and skype. The geographic references "Long Distance" or "Fern" are gone. Does that mean that the geographical distance is of no more importance or are we talking of a different distance?

IL: I find it hard to think about this question as a whole. When I link the first part of the question: "Does that mean that the geographical distance is of no more importance?" to both our practices, it makes me think of the effort it takes to travel to and undertake a project in another part of the world. I believe that relocating oneself, both physically and mentally, intensifies the senses and evokes a certain acuteness throughout the body. Recent technological inventions make us forget the natural world in some ways, (time and space a priori), and make us believe that it is possible and desirable to ignore narrative, cultural and historically charged differences. By questioning the effects of distances and dissimilarities between locations and cultures, artistic research can break away from mainstream global thinking, not to arrive at nationalistic thinking, but to explore the potential of disparities and the power of confrontation.

The complex identity of a distant place -in my case Russia-, its culture and history, forms a substantial part of the reoccurring desire to travel and work 'there'. When I am in Russia, I experience a kind of alienation and an inspiring uncertainty as I feel myself oscillating between distance and proximity, being a stranger and being a friend. Of course the Russian society is different from ours in many ways, but at the same time the people don't appear to be foreign, simply because of their Slavic appearance (Caucasian races) and because of the fact that they already caught up with our standards life style. Through my Russian acquaintances I experience an inspiring outlook on life, great humour with an absurd touch and refreshing emotionality. My Russian is as limited as their English and yet to some of them I sense a connection, which goes beyond verbal communication.

As naive as it might seem to anyone with some historical knowledge, I'm seriously attracted to the socialist utopian thoughts and fascinated by the idea that the communist workers' paradise has been within reach in this part of the world. Although we all know how it brutally transformed into totalitarianism and cruel oppression, I undertake these trips, hoping to come across a crack in the taut belief that communism was doomed to fail. Both in the people and in the environment, I try to find traces of the socialist ideology and utopian thought, which survived the trauma. ..."or are we talking of another distance?" The distance to the country and to the people is extremely fruitful for the imagination and fits the concept I have of art; I see art as a productive and binding force that can arise from friction and is capable of expressing and questioning the unspeakable.

The title "Ferngespräch" (Long Distance Call) also refers to recent or just not so recent history. The term reminds the two of us very strongly of the fact that especially the two places Anneke (USA) and I (Russia) worked in, were back then rather indirectly, one might say explosively, connected. The term evokes images of operators plugging in cables, announcing "long distance call from... for you" over a lot of disturbing beeps and cracks. The works shown in this exhibition constitute a "Long Distance Call" between them as well. Several aspects of the works, but especially our genuine interest in identity and role-playing, form connections. But also already at the start of the projects a Long Distance Call was arranged. In order to collaborate with the local people, we had to call out to them and connect.

ADB: The question "Does that mean that the geographical distance has no more importance or are we talking of a different distance?", challenges the definition of location to me.

I find it interesting to look at the concept of the bodily experience in relation to the idea of distance and location. By looking at the use of the communication Program Skype, one could maybe say that we are getting used to seeing and hearing each other mediated, and the idea of a geographical distance loses significance. We understand the concept of this medium and thus we

