

tone tongue mouth

Wendelien van Oldenborgh

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Curated by Anna Manubens.

Fabra i Coats: Centre
d'Art Contemporani
de Barcelona i Fàbrica
de Creació.

Ajuntament de
Barcelona



The first time that Wendelien van Oldenborgh organised a film shoot it was not to make a film per se, but rather to work within the situation of its making. The artist had worked with film before, in Super 8 and 16 mm, but always making documentary captures of situations that did not need the preparation of a shoot. When she finally set out to prepare one, it was not geared towards obtaining images but rather used as a pretext to structure an encounter and shape the relationships between participants. “I approached it as if it were a film production but we weren’t actually making a film. It was just a way for making things grow.” (W. van Oldenborgh). This encounter, which took place in Rotterdam, in 2004, never became a film, nor was it made public.

tone tongue mouth presents for the first time documentation and other materials from that Rotterdam proto-film shoot in 2004, proposing that it renders visible, in its most radical way, an understanding of filmmaking as a dramaturgy that enables collective agency rather than a disciplinary process for a controlled production of images and discourse. The artist does not *direct* films, in the strict sense of the act of “directing” but views them as a framework of hospitality in which to welcome and mobilise subjects for a revision and polyphonic elaboration of collective narratives and fictions.

The exhibition focuses on this preferred methodology and the polyphonic nature of Van Oldenborgh’s work, observing the role played by the voice in her practice, from two perspectives. On the one hand, from the viewpoint of her overall trajectory and given that this is her first retrospective, the exhibition walk-through allows to perceive the gradual shaping of a personal voice, which is to say, of a singular artistic methodology and language. In the case of this artist, very often that which is one’s own is found through that which is other. Or, to put it differently, in order to situate her own enunciation and to establish a place from which to speak with legitimacy, her voice is somehow multiplied, made other or made with others. On the other hand, at the scale of each individual work, the exhibition focuses on the political efficacy of strategies related to speech, to the allocation of voices, to the choral construction of narratives and the degree of ownership that can be claimed over what is said said. What comes from speaking out or from letting someone else speak for you

The title of this retrospective is composed of three words that may evoke what a voice is made of. Their juxtaposition alludes to the gesture of unpacking that guided the idea of the show. The sequence of words also suggests a slippage from remoteness to embodiment. From the *tone* that can be heard at a distance and is empty of semantic content, to the

mouth as the embodied place of enunciation, going through the tongue/ language (in Spanish and Catalan) the word “lengua” or “llengua” means both tongue *and* language), which is both a visceral organ and a political construction.

tono lengua boca is above all a title conceived for its rhythm as the chorus for a song. In one of the works on display we hear someone say “we can’t just sing our way to revolution [...] it might inspire revolution, or be a sound track to revolution, but music [...] works on your emotions and it goes in a different place.” The exhibition, nonetheless, prefers not to underestimate the importance of that other place and to this end it stresses, as yet another layer of the voice, the central role of musical composition in Van Oldenborgh’s work, which until now remained underexplored.

In its first presentation at the Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, in Madrid, the exhibition followed a circular layout and the pieces were arranged in three consecutive curved sections. For its second iteration at Fabra i Coats, it was adapted to a two-floor space while keeping the curved, arranging the works around their three materials —concrete, fabric and wood—, which are citations from Van Oldenborgh’s references and motifs.

A series of works related to Brazil gravitate around a concrete semi-circle that is an homage to the thinking and buildings of the Italian-Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi, who, in many her projects searched to produce encounters between its users or dwellers. In front of the wall is *Bete & Deise* (2012), the opening piece for the exhibition in which speaking is both the subject of the conversation and the problem that little by little conditions it. The film captures an encounter between Bete Mendes and Deise Tigrona and creates a contrast between two generations of feminism and two ways of understanding and using a public presence and voice. In parallel, the piece brings to the surface —if one focuses on the more subliminal rather than explicit gestures and attitudes— contradictions of class and race that hinder their dialogue and predispose their ways of speaking.

Behind the wall, as both the past and the conditions for making *Bete & Deise*, the totality of *A Certain Brazilianness* is presented for the first time, a line of works spanning across several years and phases that covers the artist’s progressive involvement with Brazil and in parallel the gradual consolidation of a methodology that began in Rotterdam in 2004 and led to *Maurits Script* (2006). This work is, as its name suggests, first and foremost a script that was compiled by the artist from various historic materials and sources to revise The Netherlands’ brief colonial period in Brazil (1637–1644). The film is about voicing and thus embodying positions

from the past that are not always easy to utter for those who read them. The reading functions as a kind of collective exorcism. The participants allow themselves to be momentarily seized by alienating testimonies before exorcizing them collectively in an open conversation.

If the pieces around the concrete wall are those that problematise or try to clarify what this “certain Braziliannes” might be, the ones that follow, around the fabric curtain, could be said to address a “certain Dutchness”, casting doubt on what is Dutch.

In *No False Echoes* (2008), an approach to colonization from the scope of sound that underscores the control of radio space in Indonesia, the use of a temporarily alienated enunciation reappears as a strategy that increases the potency of one’s voice. The film features the recording of a reading of the pamphlet *Als ik eens Nederlander was* [If I were a Dutchman], written in 1913 by radical Indonesian nationalist, Soewardi Soerjaningrat from the standpoint of the other, the voice of the coloniser, as if he were Dutch. Literally putting his words in the mouth of the oppressor works as a a Derridian *phármakon*, both poison and antidote for the power of his speech.

La Javanaise (2012), presented alongside *No False Echoes*, is also a work associated with The Netherlands’ colonial past in Indonesia. *La Javanaise*, however, puts a question mark over what is allegedly Dutch. Taking the Dutch textile company Vlisco as a starting point, the film brings to light the colonial exploitation inscribed in textiles that shamelessly call themselves “Real Dutch Wax” with absolute historical amnesia.

Finally, surrounded by a wooden quarter circle that reproduces a design by Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck, is a new sound installation called *From Left to Night LP* (2019), a sequel to the film *From Left to Night* from 2015. Following the structure of an LP, the artist reworked the soundtrack of the film, prioritising conversations engaging with urban tensions, like the so called “London Riots” of 2011, as well as the political and technological systems (like video surveillance) that make any resolution more complex. By doing away with the image, the blind version of *From Left to Night* (2015) eschews the danger of subduing the subjects to the narrative of the film in which they appear. It makes them ungraspable for audiovisual constructions that, like is often the case with CCTV, can become not only discursively but also legally imprisoning.

Anna Manubens



Polyphonic Stage, 2004

Splitsing, 1998

Digital video, transferred from super 8 film, black-and-white, sound. 1 min.

Splitsing, Van Oldenborgh's first recording in Brazil, is the introduction to a whole series of works that she would later undertake in Brazil.

In *Splitsing*, the artist films a street in Rio de Janeiro from the window of the Hélio Oiticica Municipal Art Centre. The sequence captures the random encounter of two bodies, one lying motionless on the pavement—initially bringing to mind both police images and forms of activism—and the other walking hesitantly. The faltering movement of the latter makes the sequence begin and end with two almost identical images and thus affords the artist an almost perfect, unplanned loop, which is presented uncut. The video includes the distinctive features of Van Oldenborgh's early video projects: silent documents recorded with light-weight analogue cameras, of situations peripheral to what would normally be the main focus of action. They are often micro-choreographies of bodies in situations of relative vulnerability.

A Certain Brazilianness (A C_B__), 2004–2006

Vitrines:

Rotterdam, 2004

Polyphonic Stage, Hoogvliet, 2004

www.acertainbrazilianness.net, 2005

Installation:

Maurits Script, 2006

A Certain Brazilianness (A C_B__) is a multi-layered project bringing together several different working phases and formats (some of which became artworks while others remained in the preparatory or transition stages of a working process) whose focus of study is Brazilian society and culture understood as the effect of postcolonial hybridisations. The title is borrowed from an expression used by Maria Moreira—a participant in the first iteration of the project—to refer to a cultural identity made from assemblages, rituals and areas of blurred identity.

All the moments that compose this line of work are presented here for the first time: a private meeting in Rotterdam (2004), a public jam session in Hoogvliet (2004), a website (2005) which hosts and publishes materials accumulated during the previous two phases, and *Maurits Script* (2006), a work which, though always exhibited separately until now, is placed here alongside the rest of the elements as a kind of closure. The sequence of

works in *A C_B__* opens with the leaflet for the exhibition *In Brazilië met Albert Eckhout (1610–1666)* [In Brazil with Albert Eckhout], which the artist visited in 2004 at the Mauritshuis museum, and reappears two years later in the *Maurits Script*, filmed in the same museum.

tone tongue mouth includes documents and other materials that have never been shown before and which underscore the continuity between one work and the next.

The series of works in *A C_B__* also highlights the progressive crystallisation of a performative approach to film making. As the artist wrote in one of the documents, “*A Certain Brazilianness* is a potential film that was searched for, researched and performed during the making of the work.”

Maurits Script, 2006

Two-channel video installation, colour, sound; architectural setting and publication. 26 min and 38 min.

Maurits Script (2006) is the third stage of *A Certain Brazilianness* (*A C_B__*) and takes the Dutch colonial past in northeast Brazil as a starting point, a history that is frequently overlooked in the Netherlands. Van Oldenborgh constructed a script around the figure of Johan Maurits van Nassau, the Dutch governor in Brazil from 1637 to 1644, who is highly regarded by the Dutch as an early humanist ruler. Compiled from sources ranging from personal letters to political council minutes, the resulting script paints a complex portrait of the conflicts of the time, including tensions between Portuguese and Dutch colonisers, and the less recognised aspects of Maurits’s governance, such as his treatment of slaves and the indigenous population.

As the title suggests, the film is about script work, more precisely about voicing and embodying the script —with the many voices and experiences it is made of— not without political or ideological difficulty at times. Van Oldenborgh casts a group of participants, each of whom has a different personal relationship with the issues raised in the script. The reading of the historical words opens up a space for criticism towards inherited voices and gives other voices a place to speak up instead.

It was filmed as a one-day public event in the Golden Room of the Mauritshuis museum, Maurits’s former residence in The Hague. On one side of the room, the participants individually read their lines, while on the other side the remaining participants engage in conversation around a table. In the discussion, they address the legacies of colonial histories within contemporary Dutch society, in particular concerning citizenship and multiculturalism, at times revealing conflicting viewpoints. Through-

out the day the conversation takes on a momentum of its own, spreading to involve the camera crew and the audience.

Flight, 1999

16 mm film, colour, no sound. 3 min.

Flight, on the other hand, moves away from those early videos and is closer to domestic recordings of personal experiences. The film immortalises the take-off of a hang-glider and its subsequent landing on a beach. More sensory than documentary, this piece is like a metaphor for the artist's line of work on Brazil as a sought-for estrangement; as an operation of leaving behind familiar ground—as a flight in the sense of fleeing—in order to drop a new anchor elsewhere.

Bete & Deise, 2012

Digital video, colour, sound. 41 min.

Bete & Deise stages an encounter between two women in Rio de Janeiro: Bete Mendes and Deise Tigrana. These women have—each in their own way—given meaning to the idea of a “public voice”. Since the 1960s, Mendes has maintained a political career alongside her acting career in popular television. Mendes was involved in the armed resistance group of the student movement against the dictatorship, and was part of the labour movement in the 1970s, co-founding the Partido dos Trabalhadores, the workers' party, that propelled Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff to Brazil's presidency. Tigrana, for her part, is one of the most powerful female voices in the Funk Carioca musical movement. Growing up and performing as a singer in the poverty-stricken community of Cidade de Deus, she rose to great international popularity when her song *Injeção* was used as the basis for M.I.A.'s popular hit *Bucky Done Gun*. Together these women talk about their experience in the world of performance and their position in the public sphere, allowing for the contradictions that they each carry within themselves to surface.

No False Echoes, 2008

Three-channel video installation with acoustic panels, colour, sound.
30 min.

The title *No False Echoes* refers to Dutch colonial policies on the first radio connections between the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies—present-day Indonesia—in which the PHOHI (Philips Holland-India Broadcasting Station) and Radio Kootwijk played a role. These policies aimed at preventing any unwanted voices or ideas from entering the colonial broadcasting spectrum, specifically nationalist ideology from Indonesian republicans.

One of the core sources for this film was the pamphlet written by radical Indonesian nationalist Soewardi Soerjaningrat, *If I were a Dutchman* (original title: *Als ik eens Nederlander was*). Written as if speaking from the standpoint of the coloniser, his text efficiently uses the other's voice to strengthen his own agency. The work was filmed at Radio Kootwijk with an invited audience and speakers who cite from this story and spontaneously discuss other issues.

La Javanaise, 2012

Two-channel video installation, colour, sound, curtain. 25 min.

La Javanaise is a film exercise that focuses on the circularity of relations between a Dutch textile company, former colonies in the East Indies, the projection of colonial history and current African markets within a contemporary, globalised world. It uses the example of the textile company Vlisco, which developed a particular fabric known as Dutch wax, or wax Hollandaise, based on the traditional Javanese resist dye method, batik. Under recent pressure of imitation from Chinese producers, Vlisco now brands itself as the “authentic and original” Dutch wax and has relaunched as a fashion label creating their products and marketing images in the Netherlands with top models of African descent from the international fashion world, targeting their products to an African customer base.

Staged in the former Colonial Institute in Amsterdam, the piece follows a fashion model (Sonja Wanda), an artist, writer and former model (Charl Landvreugd) and a writer and theorist (David Dibosa) through unrehearsed dialogue and performance, addressing the inextricable link between imagination and authenticity and between colonialism and globalisation.

From Left to Night LP, 2019

Sound installation and posters. 18 min.

From Left to Night LP is a new production and sequel to a previous project. It is, in fact, a sound version of *From Left to Night* (2015), an earlier film by the artist. In that film a number of players, places, events, subjects and stories of London, came together during a two-day shoot, connecting people, locations, and the different subjects and forms of knowledge that they brought with them. The people included two London-based hip-hop artists, a political theorist and a psychologist (both of them Brazilian), a hip-hop DJ from the Netherlands and The Showroom's collaborative projects curator.

The film production included the recording of two songs, something that prompted the artist to start imagining, after the shoot, a sound compilation that remained in its early stages until now.

From Left to Night LP is a follow up from that intention that gathers together songs and dialogue recordings from the film following an LP structure. The new piece has prioritised conversations and lyrics that refer to unresolved urban tensions, such as the 2011 London riots, and the systems, both political and technological, that provoked them. By suppressing the image, this "blind" version of *From Left to Night* creates resistance towards the imprisoning dimension of film narrative.

Exhibition co-produced by CA2M Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo and
Fabra i Coats: Contemporary Art Centre of Barcelona and Art Factory.

Opening times

Tuesdays to Saturdays, 12.00 to 20.00

Sundays and Holidays, 11.00 to 15.00

Guided tours every Saturday at 18.00

and on Sundays at 12.30

Pre-registration at centredart@bcn.cat

Limited capacity

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