

“Both a radical and mild change”

An Interview with Liesbeth Bik

The conversation with Liesbeth Bik (Bik Van der Pol) deals with the potential agency of artists in art institutions and suggests strategies to activate the beholder, whereby *The Bookshop Piece* serves as example of how Van der Pol’s intention to change institutions from within takes shape and what differentiates a public viewer from a public user.

Lucie Kolb & Gabriel Flückiger: When Maria Lind was director of Kunstverein München from 2002 to 2004 you participated as Sputnik, a special format of collaboration that Lind established in Munich. What did your contribution look like?

Liesbeth Bik: When Maria started working at Kunstverein München she asked different artists, curators, critics and writers to be one of her ‘Sputnik’ group: like fellow travelers or a board of advisors, but under a different name, thus more conceptual. At the Kunstverein we met all the other Sputniks and we talked about the program and the direction she wanted to take. It was a brainstorm gathering by a group of people who knew her practice and whom she knew and trusted, which she could use as a sounding board to test her ideas. Most people who were Sputniks also worked with her later on. For the first exhibition *Exchange and Transform (Arbeitstitel)* (2002) Maria Lind asked Apolonija Šušteršič to design the space on the ground floor, to transform it into a cafe and a more welcoming space, where people could hang out, have a coffee, look into magazines and other material. When Maria invited us to make a work for the show, we proposed to copy Apolonija Šušteršič’s design as a 1:1 model and put it in the exhibition space, where it also could be used. As part of our proposal, after the exhibition the piece would be moved to Budapest where it would be installed in the space of the Organization of Young Artists. *Lobby/Office Piece*, as we entitled the installation, connected spaces and energies. Long before to the invitation of Maria Lind, Barnabás Bencsik from Budapest asked us to think about a project for the Organization of Young Artists. This is an organization that supports Hungarian artists, where curators and other visitors can research the archives, and where public meetings take place. It is located in a classical building, and at the time it looked old, not very well maintained, and not really welcoming. We

proposed to Barnabás that we would rethink this space to make it more welcoming and functional. So in a way, the *Lobby/Office Piece* started during our first visit to Budapest. Our decision to copy the design from Apolonija’s proposal has to do with the fact that we are not designers, and that our conversation with Barnabás on what would be needed to make the space more practically useful and more welcoming, was similar to what came out of the conversation Apolonija had with Maria. Instead of creating new ideas and a new design, *Lobby / Office Piece* for Budapest emphasizes principles of circulation and reciprocity as the basis of economic and artistic exchange. The involvement of all parties, physical or financial, became part of the project and therefore indispensable: Kunstverein München that invited us to participate in this exhibition; Apolonija Šušteršič who designed the lobby of Kunstverein München and who generously supported the project by allowing us to copy her design and install it in the exhibition space; the physical work that was done in collaboration with Budapest based artists Gabor Kerekes, Gergo Kovacs and Tamás Kaszás; the Centre of Visual Arts in Rotterdam; and the Mondriaan Foundation that supported the research and production of the project. Finally, after the end of the exhibition in Munich, the Organization of Young Artists transported the piece to Budapest, where we all joined forces, thoroughly renovated the space and installed the piece to be taken into operation.

LK & GF: There were lists of demands. How far were you obliged to fulfill them? We suppose you also had freedom to work...

LB: As for the Organization of Young Artists, we observed what was happening and what didn’t happen. When you look at a space, you get a sense of where it is not working, and we thought about why and what should be improved. So we put together a



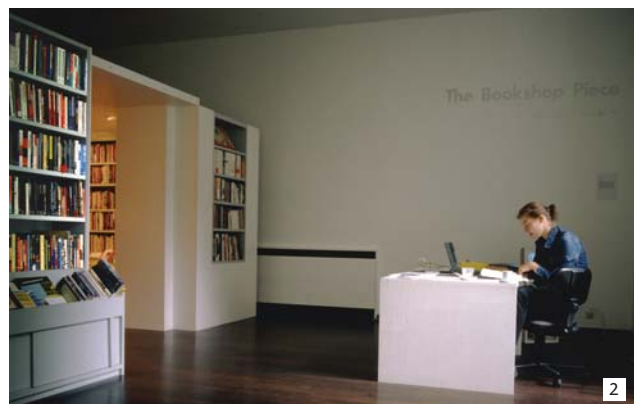
list of necessary changes in discussion with Barnabás. We would say this was also the case between Apolonija Šušteršič and Maria Lind. First you look at a space, and then a list of things that should happen there is developed in dialogue: there should be a coffee bar, book shelves, storage space, it should be mobile and flexible and it should also be a space for projections, presentations, and so on. These necessities should be very practical and efficient, but also have their very own presence.

LK & GF: Do you think something like the Sputniks is nowadays established as an institutional practice, or is such a concept bound to the individual passion of a curator? Have institutions in general become self-reflexive and do they work with a certain flexibility and openness in terms of formats and the status of exhibitions?

LB: Over the last five or ten years we have seen big powerhouses such as some museums, biennials, and art fairs, incorporating many of the practices that started in the small offside spaces. Art fairs and museums started discursive programs, performances, and other things that perhaps were not part of their core business until recently. Museums are still seen as institutions that collect and store objects and show them publicly. On the other hand they had to develop their public tasks enormously, and artistic practice has also moved from sculpture and painting towards different media and forms of participation; for some practices the art fair or museum is perhaps not the best place, so artists turned away from these institutions. Or institutions turned away from these practices. This is especially true for practices that are process-based, with an uncertain outcome, or no outcome whatsoever, that can also fail—these have a certain inherent risk. But if a contemporary art institution considers the contemporary as ‘their business,’ then they have to reflect on that, and incorporate such practices somehow. And you can see that happening, perhaps too slowly.

LK & GF: How do you experience the relationship with institutions within your own practice? You’re doing projects that are self-initiated as well as invitation based.

LB: The first two projects that started our collaboration also marked the move out of the studio. We wanted to set aside the studio as a place where artistic practice happens, and critically dispute this through our work. *The Kitchen Piece* (1995), *The Shower Piece* (1995), and *The Bookshop Piece* (1996) were works that did not need the studio to be conceived and produced. *The Bookshop Piece* was produced in the museum workshop, and via fax and telephone; you don’t need a studio for that. These first pieces were a straightforward resistance towards the institution of the studio; we think that’s an institution too. These works stepped away from it. So the institutions—museums, biennials—that invite us have become the space of production. We work with the respective technical teams, curators or other fellow workers to realize our work. For us, working with institutions, which is always the people in those institutions, is a very productive and empowering situation. We develop our work in dialogue, at first between ourselves, then with the people that invite us. We always have discussions with curators about our ideas: how we do it, what we need, and so on. This is a collaboration that also depends largely on the curator or the director of an institution, on how they want to work with us. There are curators that have a very object-oriented—not an artistic-practice oriented—approach. So they don’t necessarily want to work with the artist. Then there are curators who are very invested in working with artists. In such a situation you are really able to build a constructive and critical relationship with someone, one that is fruitful and dynamic, that ideally brings you and the work further, but which brings the institution further as well.



LK & GF: Wouldn't you say that some of the institutions associated with this latter type and with New Institutionalism failed in the sense that they've been shut down (e.g. Rooseum) or because budgets were massively cut? That this type of engaged or dialogic practice by curators now has a more difficult stand or has even disappeared in some places?

LB: Some artistic and curatorial practices are more difficult: for politicians, and perhaps also for the public. Discursive practices, performances, exhibitions that take a long time to experience or that you have to return to because a work slowly changes. These works demand time and effort, and it is clear that such practices are difficult for politicians, because they feel they represent the taste or the expectations of the public and they think the public needs immediate digestion, immediate results. So they tend to reject these practices. However, the issue is: should a museum or an institution give the public what they want, and if the public does not get what it wants, should budgets then be cut? A common argument is that these practices are too difficult, too complicated for people to understand. But the same argument could apply to an impressionist painting: that in order to understand what you see, or even to see it at all, you must understand its time and tradition, in the context of other traditions that came before or after it. Of course you can look at the picture and say this is nice, nice color and so on—but then you only experience a fraction of what it is. I think the people who invest their whole life and energy into making, organizing, thinking and discussing art also have the right to see, to experience, challenging exhibitions, that meet *their* expectations. If every exhibition has to accommodate the needs of a general public who refuses to invest more than three seconds in looking at a painting, then people who have invested more time in thinking about these things will never be satisfied. So what will they get out of this?

LK & GF: We like what Charles Esche said, that nowadays, you need to have people that are really pissed off with you in order to know you are achieving something, for example that they engage with what you do.

LB: Yes, perhaps it's better to make people slightly irritated to say the least because then there is a minimum chance they will start wondering what they are looking at. I think recent attacks on art have to do with this attitude: people in general refuse to do something; if they see something, they refuse to

engage because they have delegated decision-making processes to the politicians. So they vote once, and then somebody else has to do it. Then they can be angry from the sidelines because it's never what they wanted. This is a cynical form of democracy.

LK & GF: What's your stance on institutional critique, is it an important reference for you? Maria Lind wrote that artists like Apolonija Šušteršič who work in collaboration with the institution are part of a new phase of institutional critique, which comes not from the outside but mostly from within. Do you see yourselves in this tradition?



LB: I would say so. Institutional critique from the outside didn't prove to be very efficient, very effectual. The institutional critique from the 1970s didn't change the institutions; the institutions incorporated this critique in their collection, turned it into an object, an artifact. You cannot escape this. Changing or adjusting course within the context of an institution, not throwing stones, but by proposing things from within, perhaps works better. When we showed *Sleep with me* (1997) at the Rooseum in 2003, it was necessary that the museum would be open at night, because the people should sleep there during a projection of Andy Warhol's film *Sleep*. So the museum changed its usual opening hours, and other logistics. When we showed *Sleep with me* in the Tokyo art gallery in 2000 the film reels had to be changed, all day, by the staff. The work had a big impact on the staff, because film *Sleep* consists of 5 reels to be changed every hour, they had an alarm clock in the office, which went off every 15 minutes, and they had to run and change the reel. This is a different responsibility towards a work than with a piece that stands or hangs in a space and finally you take it away after 6 weeks or so. We also did another piece at the Rooseum with previous director Bo Nilsson, involving sleeping cabins and a library (*Capsule Hotels for Information, Dreams, Brilliant*

Thoughts and Other Things, 1999). For this piece people should be able to go back to the library, grab a book and sleep or eat with that book. So the museum developed a card that meant visitors didn't have to pay the entrance fee every time they wanted to come. They could come whenever they wanted, which is both a radical and a mild change to the door policy of the museum.

LK & GF: At least in the framework of the piece.

LB: Not only. With the card they could also see the whole group exhibition (*On The Sublime*) that the piece was part of. What we do with our work is to lure people in and not to smash them in the face. *The Bookshop Piece* for example was critiquing a cultural climate in a city as well as a museum like Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam. No proper bookshop existed in this museum, actually in the whole city of Rotterdam there was not a proper bookshop, I would even argue that in the whole Netherlands there was not a proper bookshop. This means that there was no availability of knowledge. We are talking pre-internet. We were often in London and often visited the ICA bookshop there; a very exciting bookshop where you did not find the books, the books would find you. So together with our collaborator at the time, Peter Fillingham, we decided to copy this bookshop and bring it to Rotterdam. I wouldn't say that this piece *radically* changed the institution because there's still the regular bookshop in the Boijmans with Taschen, key hangers, and so on. But I think it does change the *notion* of different institutions and museums, not only in the sense of what sort of bookshop they want to have, but how they want to make knowledge available, what they make visible. This is really important. Is it only exhibitions, or is it also research, thinking? Pieces like *The Bookshop Piece*, but also works by other artists that focused in a similar way on issues of visibility and information, have the potential to change the thinking, positioning and performance of institutions.

LK & GF: Your projects are often remembered very differently by individual beholders or participants. You mentioned for example that people sometimes remember *The Bookshop Piece* as an artwork, sometimes as a bookshop. Is the audience reaction something you also document?

LB: We don't record it. You don't need to document everything. Often an artist tends not to spend a lot of time with his or her work after the opening. But for pieces like *The Bookshop Piece* and *Sleep with*

me, we were present; we were there to inform the public and sell the books, we changed the reels of the film *Sleep with me*. We were the ones who actually saw and felt how the public was dealing with it. For *The Bookshop Piece* it was interesting that initially visitors had this regular museum posture, they usually walk with hands on their back and are looking for the card that explains what they are looking at. *The Bookshop Piece* looks like a piece of minimal art from the back; walking around to the front it becomes the bookshop. It was fascinating to see how the body language changed completely—this leads to the observation that the public *performs* being public. Moving from the back to the front of this piece, they turn from public viewers into public users, and if they're lucky they become enthusiastic public users, and this is when they want to have the books. In the case of *Sleep with me*, people slept with the film. But of course they didn't sleep immediately. At first there's this kind of excitement, reminiscent of youth hostels and puberty, maybe even erotic excitement. All the beds and the floor are occupied, this is sleeping *together* also, not only sleep 'with me.' It's sleeping together as well as experiencing that film, seeing and understanding that it is a very early example of copy-paste, copy-paste; the technique Andy Warhol used to make this film is a very hands-on copy-paste activity. But of course after two hours they fall asleep. Then you only hear snoring and the rattling of the film projectors transporting the celluloid. Beautiful.

Bik Van der Pol (Liesbeth Bik and Jos Van der Pol) work collectively since 1995. They live and work in Rotterdam. Bik Van der Pol explore the potential of art to produce and transmit knowledge. Their working method is based on co-operation and research methods of how to activate situations to create a platform for various kinds of communicative activities. www.bikvanderpol.net

Captions

1 Bik Van der Pol, Lobby / Office Piece for Budapest, 2002. First presented during: *Exchange & Transform (Arbeitstitel)*, Kunstverein München. Installed in Budapest in November 2002.

2 Bik Van der Pol in collaboration with Peter Fillingham, *The Bookshop Piece*, 1996. Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

3 Bik Van der Pol, *Sleep With Me*, 1997 Duende, Rotterdam. 30 people were invited to spend the night in one of the exhibition spaces (9 m x 13 m) where we installed 30 beds and where people could stay and watch Andy Warhol's 6 hour film 'Sleep' (1963).