

Second form of a text for my dear Astrid

In the middle of the room a screen relays a live video. Opposite the screen, which monitors everything that is happening in the space, seven moist blocks of terracotta clay are arranged next to seven grey cushions in a neat triangular formation. I place myself at a polite distance from other spectators who settle against the interior walls of the building. People enter the room slowly, with the hesitant step typical of both trained and untrained viewers when confronted with a performative situation. The footsteps of the trickling crowd rub against the dull silence that holds us collectively in suspense. When Astrid Specht Seeberg stands up and moves slowly but confidently toward the foremost cushion, marking the point of the triangle, the room's noise fades. She removes her shoes, places them beside the screen and reaches for the first block of clay. Her silhouette fills the screen. She positions a large lump on top of her head.

One by one, others from the audience follow her example; removing their shoes so that a line of footwear is formed, joining the formation, sinking into the cushions, clawing at the clay. Slowly the triangular formation completes itself.

Astrid Specht Seeberg calls this particular situation *ClayPlay*. The performance takes place in the Old House of Kunsthal Ghent, a former place of refuge, within the framework of *For some time I've been standing*. Alongside works by Michael Kleine, Manon de Boer, Brigitte Louter, and Chupan Atashi, Astrid Specht Seeberg's *ClayPlay* operates as a living inscription, unfolding as a trace within the context of an exhibition that happens in a palimpsestual dialogue with the fresco on the back wall of the Old House. The exhibition takes its titles from a sentence in Kathy Acker's novel *My Mother: Demonology*: "For some time I've been standing, in front of a white stucco wall, on a white road that is raised above all the surroundings and the dirt underneath, as though it's a platform. All around me are masses of luggage, suitcases and bags."

Instead of offering a ritual, Seeberg opens up the room. Unlike more authoritative rituals or even charismatic control, she positions herself carefully; she is instructive but never directive. The inexperienced hands of the participants gradually build masks onto their heads. Cold, damp, stubbornly heavy. Clay is a material that resists a certain kind of elegance. The participants press it onto the tops of their heads. The act is simple, almost childlike, and somehow sort of unsettling. At first sight it is strange enough to see facial features disappear under lumps of clay; stranger still when we find recognition in their new faces. The participants unconsciously mirror their audience as well, blind and guided by the shifting energies of the room. They are like situation-sponges, surrendered to an intuitive search, with their hands they seem to knead their insides outward, materializing something (...).

Time slips away as we watch the untrained actions. Seeberg has a clear preference for amateur gestures. The vulnerability of these masked figures is not a private matter but a condition of collective exposure. In a culture that exhausts itself in the imperative to adapt, optimize; to be constantly fitting, we are left drained of desire. *ClayPlay* asks participants to sit with the discomfort of suspending immediate function, of losing track of where one's body begins and ends. The suspension of productivity becomes a reorientation toward other rhythms that rarely find space in daily life.

I stand up and take off my shoes. I try to align my brown boots perfectly with a large pair of slippers. When I sit down on the grey cushion, I braid my hair, in vain to protect it against the stiff terracotta mass I will have to face. One last time I see myself on the screen that projects my double, before my eyelids slip under the dark mass. My hands grope for the wet clay and hurriedly begin to build a load-bearing structure. I grab at the moist block with large, careless strokes.

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First sketch! (Loose ideas)

In an art world saturated with works that aim for the iconic, the monumental, the market, **performance art is ... !**

Opposing her fired ceramic practice, this is an important exercise to move away from an object-based practice. The masks are made to dissolve. Moving away from the object-based idea of a ‘masterpiece,’ where meaning is tied to profundity and inexhaustible attention, this performance switches between different modes of attention. Engaged looking is defined as an embodied, perpetual wavering between here and elsewhere, trying to provoke debate on the idea of ‘the self’. Bodies become most visible precisely when they are most precarious, when they are forced to rely on the rhythm of others. Every social encounter is a play of masks, roles, re-enactment and performativeness.

The idea of the camera: we are documenting as we look. The photographic condition of contemporary spectatorship — physically present and yet networked to multiple elsewhere — is folded into the work. Looking and being looked at happen together. The role of the photographer becomes almost performative, as everyone documents with their phones in addition to the livestream.

A ritual site of any kind is a place programmed for the enactment of something; it is designed for some kind of performance. It has this structure whether or not visitors can read its cues. This performance does not want to be a ritual as a formal spectacle; it is a reenactment of the identity politics of today. Building an igloo as a contemporary temple, holding the collective unconscious, it becomes a sacred space without dogma.

What does it mean now, in a world struggling with loss, displacement, and anger, where people are full of “angst”? *ClayPlay* becomes a rehearsal for carrying weight together. The audience is asked to recognize themselves in awkward gestures, in hesitant movements, in slipping and collapsing.

Cold, damp, stubbornly heavy. Clay is a material that resists a certain form of elegance. The participants press it onto the top of their heads. The act is simple, almost childlike, yet somewhat uncanny. The context of this performance is the Old House of Kunsthal Ghent. (More details: place for refuge, context For some time I’ve been standing, werk van Michael Kleine, Manon De Boer, Brigitte Louter, Chupan Atashi, idea of having performances as a palimpsestual trace)

People are slowly entering the room met de aarzelende stap die zowel ongetrainde als geoefende kijkers kenmerkt bij de confrontatie met een performatieve situatie. In het midden van de ruimte staat een beeldscherm opgesteld. Ik bevind me op

beleefde afstand van andere toeschouwers die zich laten zakken tegen de binnenkant van de muren van het gebouw. De voetstappen van het binnensijpelend volk schuren met de doffe stilte die ons collectief in spanning houdt voor wat er staat te gebeuren. Tegenover het scherm dat live monitort wat er in de ruimte gebeurt, staan er zeven vochtige blokken klei in terra cotta kleur opgesteld naast zeven grijze kussens in een keurige driehoeksformatie. Wanneer Astrid rechtstaat en zich traag, maar zelfzeker richting het kussen vooraan begeeft, dat de punt van de driehoek aangeeft, stopt het geschuifel van de voeten en dempt het omgevend geluid van de bezoekers. Ze stopt om haar schoenen uit te trekken en die naast het scherm te plaatsen. Ze grijpt naar de eerste blok klei die zich op de punt van de driehoeksformatie voor het scherm bevindt. Seeberg's silhouet verschijnt op het midden van het scherm. Een grote homp positioneert ze bovenop haar hoofd. Uit het publiek komen druppelsgewijs andere personen haar vervoegen. Langzaam vervolledigt de driehoeksformatie zich. De anderen volgen haar voorbeeld; trekken hun schoenen uit zodat een lijn van schoeisel ontstaat, nemen plaats op het kussen en klauwen in de klei.

Astrid Specht Seeberg calls this particular situation ClayPlay. Instead of offering a ritual, she opens up the room. Unlike more authoritative rituals or even charismatic control, Seeberg positions herself carefully ; she's instructive but never directive. De onervaren handen van de deelnemers bouwen geleidelijk aan maskers op hun hoofden.

Op het eerste zicht is het bevreemdend te noemen, wanneer de gelaatstrekken van de deelnemers langzaam verdwijnen achter hompen klei, maar nog bevreemdender wordt het wanneer we herkenning vinden in hun nieuwe gezichten. De deelnemers spiegelen onbewust ook hun publiek, blind geleid door de energie van de ruimte. Ze zijn als situatie-sponzen overgeleverd aan een intuïtief verkennen: ze lijken met hun handen hun binnenste naar buiten te kneden. De tijd verglijdt terwijl we kijken naar de ongetrainde handelingen. Seeberg heeft een duidelijk voorliefde voor de amateurgebaren. De kwetsbaarheid van deze gemaskerde figuren is geen privéaangelegenheid, maar een toestand van collectieve exposure. The imperative to adapt, optimize, to be constantly fitting in, leaved us drained of desire. ClayPlay asks participants to sit with the discomfort of suspending immediate function, losing track of where one's body begins and ends. The suspension of productivity is a reorientation towards what other rhythms we need in daily life.

Ik sta op en trek mijn schoenen uit. Ik probeer mijn bruine botjes perfect uit te lijnen met het grote paar slippers van mijn voorganger. Wanneer ik neerzit op het grijze kussen, vlecht ik mijn haren, om het tevergeefs te beschermen tegen de stugge terra cotta massa die ik te lijf zal moeten gaan. Een laatste keer zie ik mezelf op het scherm dat ons evenbeeld projecteert, voor mijn oogleden dichtglijden onder de donkere massa. Mijn handen tasten naar de natte klei en beginnen gehaast te bouwen aan een dragende structuur. Ik heb geen idee waar het naartoe gaat. Ik grijp met grote, onvoorzichtige halen naar de vochtige blok.

In an art world saturated with works that aim for the iconic, the monumental, the market, performance art is !!!!!. Opposing her ceramic practice with fired sculptures, this is an important exercise to move away from an object-based practice. The masks

are made to dissolve. Moving away from the object-based idea of a 'masterpiece', where meaning is linked to profundity and inexhaustible attention, this performance switches between different modes of attention. Engaged looking is defined as a perpetual oscillation between here and elsewhere, trying to provoke debate on the idea of the self. Bodies become most visible, precisely when they are most precarious, when they are forced to rely on the rhythm of others. Every social encounter is a play of masks, roles, re-enactment and performativeness.

The idea of the camera: we are documenting as we look. The photographic condition of contemporary spectatorship ! Physically present + networked to multiple elsewheres. Looking and being looked at. The role of the photographer becomes almost performative, as everybody is also documenting with their phones + the livestream.

Thus far, I have argued the ritual character of the museum experience in terms of the kind of attention one brings to it and the special quality of its time and space. A ritual site of any kind is a place programmed for the enactment of something. It is a place designed for some kind of performance. It has this structure whether or not visitors can read its cues. This performance doesn't want to be a ritual as a formal spectacle, it is reenactment of the identity politics of today. Building an igloo as a contemporary temple, holding the collectively unconscious. A sacred space without dogma. What does it mean now in a world struggling with loss, displacement, anger, when people are full of "angst". Clayplay becomes a rehearsal for carrying weight together. The audience is asked to recognize themselves in awkward gestures, in hesitant movements, in slipping and collapsing.