

TPSGGF

# TheParallelShow GrandeFinale

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# Preface

Frans van Lent

On June 30 and July 1, 2018, an experiment in improvised performance took place at two different locations: a white cube space in Groningen, the Netherlands, and an old chapel in Brussels, Belgium. Two groups of six artists worked simultaneously in these spaces, both individually and collaboratively. There were no rules, except that all participants were asked to start the day without any preconceived plans. In both spaces, a life-sized projection showed a video image of the other space in real time. Both spaces were otherwise empty.

Eighteen months earlier, *TheParallelShow* series had finished with an outstanding tenth edition that took place in the Met Cloisters in New York City. *TheParallelShow* was a succession of im-

provised performance sessions happening unexpectedly and without prior announcement in a wide variety of exhibition institutes throughout Europe: from the Tate Britain in London and the Sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi to the Stasi Museum in Berlin.

For each ParallelShow I selected a host – a local artist, who would then select the date, the cultural institute where the event would take place, and the group of participating artists. On the chosen morning, the artists would meet in front of the venue. Often this would be the very first time they met. They then purchased tickets and entered the venue like any other visitor. Once they were inside, they inconspicuously worked together for a full day. After the tenth and final edition, a book, titled *TheParallelShow*, was compiled, containing reports, thoughts and conversations by the performers. This was published in the spring of 2018.\*

And now, a few months later, *TheParallelShow GrandeFinale* (TPSGF) was organised to celebrate the

completion of the series. I asked the artists who had previously been hosts, or who had some other significant connection to *TheParallelShow*, to join me on this occasion. Two very different venues were selected: bG, the “white cube art space” of NP3 in Groningen, where even the carpet was soft and white; and an old neglected chapel in the building used by Greylight Projects in Brussels. Both empty spaces were equipped with video cameras and a real-time internet connection, allowing the artists in Groningen and Brussels to observe each other’s activities through a life-sized projection. The goal was to improvise together in the same physical and virtual space. The two worlds would melt into one.

All of the participating artists met in my studio in Dordrecht on Friday afternoon. After some brief introductions, the artists were divided into two groups which left in two minibuses for Groningen and Brussels.

On Saturday at 10:00 AM the artists entered the venues, the video connection was established and the doors were opened to visitors. Seven hours later the doors closed again, after which the participants left and got in the minibuses for the 400-kilometre drive between Groningen and Brussels in order to swap places. The second day of performing started on Sunday morning at 10:00 AM. Now the participants could actually experience the physical spaces which they had perceived only through a projection the day before.

Two artists did not join the ride, but instead remained at their original venues, in order to encounter both groups of performers. As in the original *ParallelShows*, the project was not documented through visual media. Instead, Sjoerd Westbroek and Michiel Huijben were asked to write a personal text about their experiences. Westbroek joined both groups in Groningen and Huijben joined both groups in Brussels.

Finally, at 5:00 PM on Sunday, the two minibuses drove back to Dordrecht for a final collective performative meal at Pictura. This 'Parallel Universe Dinner' was beautifully compiled, cooked and served by Marielle Verdijk. As with every other part of the weekend, visitors were free to join in the dinner, as had been the case with the performances.

Westbroek and Huijben did not write their texts according to any predefined format. Just like the performances, all choices were left to them. I am very pleased to say that they were both able to find a very personal approach which, particularly in combination with one another, provides a very clear representation of the occasion. Their texts naturally complement each other in both their style and content.

I would like to thank all of the artists, who often came from far away to create this beautiful and exciting weekend. Not all of them were experienced in working within this particular discipline. It re-

ally requires a professional attitude of openness and flexibility to take part in an experimental project such as this one. I would also like to thank Zwaan and Ruud from NP3, and Wouter from Grey-light Projects, for their never-ending enthusiasm and hospitality, as well as Theun Okkerse for providing the beautiful spaces of Pictura. And of course I also wish to thank the Municipality of Dordrecht for its trust and enthusiasm in supporting this project.

\*) *TheParallelShow*, Jap Sam Books, 2018. ISBN 978-94-90322-96-0



# **TheParallelShow GrandeFinale in Greylight Projects, Brussels**

Michiel Huijben

On the morning of Saturday, June 30, 2018, a group of artists enter a room in Greylight Projects, a studio building in the Saint-Josse-Ten-Node neighbourhood in the North part of Brussels. This space was once a chapel and the building a seminary, connected to a nearby church. The first thing the artists encounter is the back of a large wooden wall, about three and a half metres wide and equally high, placed about three metres away from the entrance. The front of the wall is painted white to serve as a screen, and there's a projector placed a few metres away, projecting an image of an empty space: the image of NP3 in Groningen, the other location, making this Show a Parallel one.

The chapel evokes in its visitors the kind of response that often occurs when one enters religious architecture of any kind: a bodily or emotional response. In any case, one that precedes words, one of reverence and awe. The entire space is about nine metres wide and some twenty-six metres deep, and lined on the left and right-hand sides by six large pillars. In the first half of the space, the walls are painted white in a slapdash manner. Here, the pillars are a pale beige with a marble effect and gold painted ornaments. The pillars support round arches that connect one pillar to the next. In the other half, the room turns darker, because here, the walls and pillars are painted a strange hue of purplish-blue. Many of the windows are taped off with black plastic bin bags. At the very end of the space the floor raises with a few steps, creating a kind of stage, or a podium. This is where the altar must have been, back when this building was a seminary. There is an upstairs area as well, though only casually present: a choir aisle runs all the way around the perimeter of the space, but it seems hidden, covered by a row of small pillars. Between these pillars, the ceiling is high and vaulted. Generally, the space has a strange mix of the overwhelming solemnity of religious architecture and the

casual sloppiness of a squat, though perhaps its overall shape causes it to feel a bit more like the first.

The artists' entire brief was to bring nothing and improvise on the spot. They are here for the day, to perform until 5:00 PM, when they will be leaving for the next day's venue, in Groningen. There are six of them: Jolanda Jansen, Ieke Trinks, Steef van Lent, Malou van Doormaal, as well as Jeroen van der Linde and Carmen Hutting (aka Mr. & Mrs. Gray) – all of them are Dutch, although apparently this is a coincidence.

I know this place well: this is my old studio building in Brussels. I'm here to document this event, and I'm carrying a notepad and a pen for this purpose. In Groningen, Sjoerd Westbroek is carrying out the same task as I am here. To the left of the big wooden screen is a stack of wooden beams, a perfect place for me to sit upon and pretend I'm not actually here.

As I sit down, Jolanda, facing the screen, gets up on a stepladder and climbs to the top rung. There, she stands still for a few seconds, until Ieke brings her a broomstick. Not sure what to do with it besides just holding it, she first holds it diagonally in front of her chest before sticking it straight upwards, the brush high above her, scraping the air.

Not much later, Jolanda will be walking around the chapel with a shelf balancing on her head. I don't know Jolanda, but she seems to find her purpose in this event (or non-event) through the use of objects.

Meanwhile, Jeroen and Carmen are already missing.

Malou, the youngest of the bunch, starts sweeping the floor. Though she is doing this more as an excuse to go around the room and start conversations than because she wants the space to be clean (which it is not), she still finishes the job.

Meanwhile, Ieke has also started sweeping the floor, but using a hand broom. Starting in the back, she methodically works her way forward. It seems as though she's determined to actually clean the floor. The sunlight, coming in through one of the windows that has not been taped shut, makes the floating dust visible.

On the screen I see Frans, in Groningen. He's lying on the floor, face down. For a split second I wonder if he's all right, but then I see other people standing behind him, as if they're all posing. Are they trying to communicate a message?

In walk Jeroen and Carmen, who is carrying a list of instructions which they both follow. She tells him to walk fifteen paces forward, then an X amount of paces left, then left again, and so on. They seem to be walking a pre-defined pattern, as though they have devised a system during the period when they were gone.

In front of the screen stands Steef, who has stopped his own activity of rolling up an extension cord (was this necessary, or is it a performance?), and is now watching Carmen and Jeroen walk across the space in seemingly random patterns. When he returns to reeling in the extension cord, he does this quietly and solemnly – in a manner that fits in with the other activities going on throughout the space. Is everything happening here now a performative gesture by default?

My attention keeps jumping around from one of the performers, to a detail of the space, to a conversation, to “Oh fuck, I need to make sure I find something to focus on and write something meaningful about it,” but who says I need to find anything at all? What am I looking for?

“Can you teach me how to say a line in Arabic?”

“Well, I don’t really speak Arabic. But what’s the line?”

“Any line.”

leke wants to learn Arabic and Malou can understand why. Jolanda is performing to the webcam, so that, at least in Groningen, she has an audience. She's sitting on the floor, facing the screen, her legs stretched out in front of her. Malou sits down next to her. She asks Jolanda what she wants to learn from this weekend.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"Well, I run on intuition, I go by instinct. I'm not here to fulfil a mission or something."

Behind them, some dust blows up and then settles as leke passes. It looks pretty, so I take a picture with my phone. Is it all right if I take a picture? I decide not to take any more, at least not while I'm here in the chapel.

Carmen and Jeroen are doing what they call “random walking”, which, from their description, I understand to be a kind of indoor psycho-geography. It’s not actually random, so it’s not that hard. What you do is: you think of, or draw out, a shape, and then translate it into steps. Ieke and Malou don’t really feel like taking part in this, until one of the instructions is to look out the window, which is when Malou joins in.

Where’s Steef? I haven’t seen him since he was reeling in the extension cord.

Suddenly, there is a brief discussion about what everyone is supposed to be doing here. What exactly is the goal of this?

Oh, there’s Steef, by the screen, playing around with the projector.

Jolanda, who is getting a bit annoyed with Malou and her questions, starts a discussion about “why vs. not wondering”.

“If I had to constantly wonder why I do things, I wouldn’t do anything at all! In your work, you deal with questions, that’s fine. I reflect in retrospect.”

It’s now 11:16, and Ieke is about halfway done sweeping the chapel. I decide to leave the room for a little while and sit in the garden.

When I return, some people are standing in the chapel, watching the screen on which I see Frans, in Groningen, holding up a piece of paper to the camera. The text on the paper is projected large on the screen in Brussels. It says:

TALK TO ME.

This is the first time I think about the idea of interaction. Who is being communicated with here, and for whose benefit? There have been no visitors to either space yet, so what is happening to the actions, the performances, that are happening and then aren't happening? Frans wants contact between Groningen and Brussels, but there's no sound. He wants interaction through text and gestures.

Jolanda isn't watching the screen, though. She's found a roll of gaffer tape, and has stuck one end of the tape to the pillar right in front of me and is now unrolling it, walking around the pillar, covering it in tape. I can't help but feel like she's wasting a perfectly good roll of gaffer tape while fixing nothing.

What kind of social experiment is this anyway? At times I feel like I'm watching a reality TV show, but I'm the only one watching and now I have to convey it to someone else, who has never seen the show.

At 12:15, some friends of mine come in. They've brought their two children. While Jeroen and Carmen are walking the shape of a question mark through the room, a three-year-old starts running around the chapel. He knows this space; he's been here before and knows what it will let him do, what possibilities there are to explore. Improvised performance is suddenly no match to his genuine playing.

When he spots a sand castle (where did that come from?), he freezes. His eyes lock upon the structure for a few seconds. Then he walks over and starts kicking it.

Jeroen and Carmen are the only ones remaining in the space while this happens – the rest have

gone out for lunch. When there's nothing left of the castle, we leave the chapel and go out to have lunch in the garden.

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When I return to the chapel after lunch, a French-speaking man who I don't know has joined the group and is doing exercises with Malou. It turns out he lives across the street, and Malou has convinced him to come in and see what's happening. After a while, when he's gone, Malou gives a shoulder massage to Frans's wife.

People between four walls are like islands floating around and only sometimes touch each other. It's no different here. I am performing small actions or gestures that resemble work, I mean actual

labour – sometimes they literally are. Mopping the floor, in all fairness, is rather pointless here, on a practical level. But the question right now is not what is useful, because nothing is.

leke now swings around the mop she's been using to clean the floor, then beats it on the tiles, then just throws it away as far as she can. Is she merely being recalcitrant, or does this actually have some theatrical function? If that's the case, is it useful? Who is it for? On the screen, in Groningen, someone is doing the same thing. Jolanda is now jumping up and down, synchronising her jumps with someone on the screen. In two places in the world, right now, people are jumping up and down in small jumps at exactly the same speed while swinging their arms. There is boredom, with a dash of despair, or frustration, in the air.

Recently, a colleague showed me a chart from a book on management. It consisted of a list of components which together should constitute work, and what would be the result if the work were to

be missing one, several, or all of these components. If work does not lead to a “result”, it can only lead to frustration and a general feeling of uselessness. But without a goal, can a result even exist?

When Malou asked her colleagues what their goal for the day was, what could they have answered that would have made sense? Does Malou have a clear goal?

The gaffer tape that Jolanda had wrapped around the pillar has been peeled off by someone and is now serving as a kind of washing line for Ieke's mop. There is some interaction with Groningen. Though it's mostly imitation or a synchronised playing around, it makes me think about how duplication increases the value of things. Not in an economic sense, obviously, but in the sense that “einmal ist keinmal”: once is nothing. Repetition creates patterns and patterns create meaning.

What can you go against when there is no resistance to anything you do? But how long should an action or a gesture take for it to become meaningful or have an effect?

After doing some synchronised whatever through the webcam, Ieke starts dancing, and when Malou uses her phone to put on some music to go with it, they both dance in front of the screen, as if they were teenagers filming themselves. Without the camera, and without the screen, how would these actions take place? Would they take place at all? Throughout the day, the group has been developing a dislike for this whole thing, and Jeroen seems to be feeling the strongest resistance.

Jeroen and Carmen are still sitting silently on a bench facing the webcam, but all the way in the back of the space, over where the altar would have been.

At 2:00 PM exactly, Jeroen and Carmen walk out of the space in unison, but Jolanda doesn't see

this, because she's walking around the room with a black cloth draped over her head, her hands stretched out in front of her so as not to bump into someone or something.

Two people are playing catch with the leftover roll of tape. It's 2:15.



Communication between the two spaces doesn't seem to be possible. However, there does seem to be a lot of miscommunication.

A visitor, an older man, has joined the group. He looks fairly nondescript: I mean, he has grey hair and glasses, but that's all I can remember of him now. He's walking circles through the chapel and

is dragging a wooden board and a broom behind him. At 2:55, he stands right in front of the screen, where the webcam can see him, and holds the board above his head.

I'm not particularly interested in truthfulness: I can't be a camera, but all of this has happened the way I'm describing it.

At 3:07, as I'm walking into the space, I overhear the group discussing the idea of leaving behind an object for tomorrow's group. I decide to stay behind the screen, where they can't see me. Malou proposes to leave behind a problem for the others. I'm not sure why I'm hiding.

"How about we tape off the webcam?" Jeroen suggests.

I like to think it should be something that Group Two simply cannot ignore. Isn't this space enough?

How can you ignore it? What more should a space be in order to offer something, to serve as material?

“Should we suspend this tube from the choir aisle’s railings?”

Everyone agrees it should be a surprise for Group Two. Why is there this need for interaction with the other group? Malou has a problem with how non-committal the whole event seems to be, and mainly wants to address this. But why address this for the other group, and not for yourselves?

“We all have time, but where is the urgency of us being here? How can we make this time constructive?”

“Well, what do we want to get from this, for ourselves?” Ieke asks.

The group thinks that the main problem is the fact that there is no cohesion in the group. Also, there is a webcam filming them.

At 4:15, there's a joint photo moment between Group One and Group Two – perhaps the most fruitful interaction between the two groups.

During the final half hour, the surprise intervention for Group Two is being prepared. Jeroen tapes off the webcam, so that the intervention will not be broadcast in Groningen. A banana is hung from an elastic string. It's 5:00 PM.

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Day two, Sunday, July 1. Group Two starts by taking a group photo. This group seems much more comfortable around screens and cameras. Still, before actually starting the day, they agree to ignore the camera as much as possible today. This group consists of six artists, the same number as yester-

day. They are Alexia Karavela, Marnik Neven, Emma Waltraud Howes, Andrew McNiven, Elia Torrecilla and Frans van Lent, who has organised this whole event.

This is how the day starts: Alexia is stacking some objects in the middle of the chapel. She has placed a piece of wood upright and balanced a square-ish piece of styrofoam on top of it. The construction is about thirty centimetres high.

Meanwhile, Emma is dragging a metal tube through the space, walking around the chapel's perimeter, in the same way that people often did yesterday as well. There is almost no random walking through the room, everyone seems to want to stay close to the walls. Perhaps the space demands this? If so, it must be because of the pillars, which create two corridors about one and a half metre wide, on the left and right sides. Every time Emma steps off one of the steps in the back of the space, the tube falls on the floor with a loud clang. Can she just stop, please?

Why is Marnik pulling loose flakes of paint off of the walls and pillars? I guess “why” is a stupid question... He’s collecting the flakes from the purplish-blue wall, which seem to be peeling off by themselves. I realise it’s exactly the colour of a sweater my ex-girlfriend used to have, and which she gave to me at some point. She used to say it was indigo, and that it suited me better than her. I threw it out after we broke up. The annoying thing about memories is that they’ll stick to anything.

I guess this space is now hosting another group of bodies that have no idea where they are, and are looking for something to grasp, intent on making something.

Emma, dressed in loose-fitting black clothes and wearing white socks and black shiny shoes, is obviously a very physical performer. She uses her entire body to strike poses in the space. She leans backward in the middle of the space and tilts her head to the left, before holding this pose for a minute or so. There is a kind of solemnity to some of the actions which is, at times, hard for me to

deal with, but I guess all everyone is doing here is to try and find their own zone of concentration and somehow convey it.

It's 10:51 and Andrew is walking back into the space, after having been outside on the phone for a long time. He passes by me, a bit uncomfortably it seems, walks along the left edge of the chapel, and sits down quietly on the grey bench in the back. I think Andrew is a talker, the kind of person who knows many things about many things and will tell you all of them. Not so much a performer, perhaps. I wonder what he will end up doing today?

And Marnik is still collecting flakes of paint, and Elia is walking past with her right arm stretched out in front of her, clutching a remote control or something, and it clicks when she presses a button and she's marching through the room to the beat of the click till she reaches the screen and the

performance ends and somewhere in a corner I hear Frans and Andrew talking, but I don't see them, because I'm watching Emma and Elia, who are swinging a rope and Alexia is skipping it.

Marnik has found a ladder and he's collecting paint from high up on the pillars, where there are larger flakes to be found because no one else has ever reached there. He seems to have attained a level of concentration that the others have, at times, also found, but have not been able to maintain as long as he has. He doesn't seem to register the others most of the time. He's going from wall to pillar to wall again, and has already amassed quite an impressive collection of flakes of indigo paint.

Andrew has a sound recorder on him now, so is he recording? No. He calls for the group to gather and asks them to collaborate on a sound piece he would like to do: if he could just be alone in this chapel for fifteen minutes and record nothing but the space and its ambient sounds.

After fifteen minutes we return to the chapel, and Andrew tells us about the experience and the sounds he heard. The space was full of sounds, like wind and birds and the singing from the gospel church next door. It's true that this music, which wasn't there yesterday, is creating a strange contrast between the inside and the outside, a contrast which also wasn't there yesterday. At least not like it is today.

It's 11:30 when Frans, instructed by Andrew to do so, stands at an open window to feel the breeze. He stands there for several minutes (five? ten?) with eyes closed and shoulders relaxed.

Emma stands in front of the stage at the end of the room, bent over, dragging her hands across the floor. Then she suddenly moves forward, but in a squatting position, and when she reaches a pillar, she stands up, wraps her arms round the pillar and swings in circles around it. I think I've seen Elia do this here before – so this, again, is perhaps something the space wants or suggests?

A chapel, in itself, is a performative space.

Marnik enters. When did he leave?

He's carrying his laptop, opened and resting on the palm of his right hand, the way a waiter would carry plates to a table, the way I have never been able to. He sits down on the pile of wood that I'm also sitting on. I move away.

On the other side of the room, Alexia is leaning against an indigo pillar, looking around with a smile on her face – this is how I will remember her. She's looking at Elia and Emma, who are dragging a length of orange rope through the chapel. Are they hoping to chance upon an image or a symbol of sorts? The hardest thing about this type of performance must be that you can never really know whether you've found something good, found an interesting image, because you are the image

just as much as the gesture is the image – I realise that this means that the only thing you have to hold on to is your own experience of the moment itself, and I think that’s where the sense of solemnity comes from.

I wonder what this group felt the space they were in yesterday wanted from them? Anything? I turn to the screen and see Group One sitting in a circle on the floor in Groningen. They must be having a meeting. Sjoerd is the only one sitting on a chair and he’s taking notes, just like I am. Group One doesn’t look as desperate as they did yesterday; they seem to be more at ease, which makes me wonder what their meeting is about.

I sit down on the grey bench, but carefully, because there’s some cardboard lying on the right side of the bench and I don’t know what it’s doing there. In the middle of the chapel, on the boundary where the walls change from white to indigo, the elastic string is still hanging, but the banana is

gone. It's been replaced by a broken intercom with a little twig stuck through its curly cord. Also, the square-ish piece of styrofoam from earlier today is stuck onto the twig.

In the opening chapter of Witold Gombrowicz's 1967 novel *Cosmos*, the protagonist Witold and his traveling companion Fuks are walking through the Polish countryside, in the blazing sun, looking for a place to stay the night. When they go off into some bushes to find some shade and sit down for a while, they're startled by the discovery of a sparrow, hung from a branch on a piece of wire. Stopped in their tracks, they try to find out what it could mean, because Witold especially is convinced it cannot be meaningless.

Throughout the course of their travels, their obsessive search for the significance of this construction-with-bird extends to include the entire world: from a crack in the ceiling, shaped like an arrow, to the trembling corner of the pension keeper's daughter's mouth, everything becomes a clue to

be followed. Behind me, I hear Frans speaking to Emma. I can only make out the word “meaning”. Marnik is sticking together his collected flakes of indigo paint, using orange insulation tape he found somewhere.

Alexia takes out a tourist map of Groningen from her pocket and tapes it to the piece of styrofoam on the twig in the curly cord of the broken intercom. It’s now noon.

Elia is dragging the orange rope through the space and peering at the screen through a cardboard tube.

In Groningen, Group One is having a meeting. Again, or still? Group Two is collectively observing them when Andrew notices that there’s an A4-sized piece of paper with text stuck to the wall in Groningen. He suggests they ask the other group to send over a photograph of it, so Frans sends

38 Malou a message asking for the picture. It takes a while for Malou to notice the message, but even-

tually she gets up and takes a photo. A visitor walks in. At the same time I hear Andrew saying, to no one in particular: "it's all theology." I assume he's talking about the chapel, but he's not. He's talking about the space in Groningen.

1:36 PM. After lunch, Marnik finished his indigo paint flake piece, which is now hanging like a flag from the last marbled pillar on the right side of the chapel.

A man has joined in and is walking around the perimeter of the room with a bucket and a mop he got from Frans. He will introduce himself later on as Stefan Wouters.

Meanwhile, Andrew is taking pictures of Alexia posing as Patti Smith, Emma as Lance Armstrong, and asks me to pose as Tintin. I oblige and pose with my notepad and pen in hand.

Something of a procession is taking shape when Frans starts following Stefan, carrying a jacket he found lying around somewhere. Soon enough Elia is behind him, carrying a piece of cardboard, and behind Elia is Emma, carrying a bottle of water.

On the screen, someone in Groningen is holding a phone in front of the webcam. A live video on this phone shows that Group One, or most of it, is outside.

The procession is still going on when two visitors enter. The young couple sits down on the steps at the end of the chapel and the procession intensifies in form. I move to the spot right above the altar, where there once must have been a statue. This way, I'm standing more or less straight across from the webcam, but just outside of its view. Slowly, the procession disbands in favour of other activities.

Stefan pulls the elastic cord that's holding the intercom-twig-styrofoam-map-of-Groningen construction, and it swings through the space. It's interesting to observe how much he's participating in all of this, starting out by doing what he's asked before gradually finding his own role and bringing in his own ideas.

After ten minutes of observing, the couple leaves again, but the actions continue.

Emma returns to dragging the metal pipe through the space, while Alexia gets up from sitting against a pillar and walks to the orange rope that has been strung in diagonal lines across the space between several pillars.

\* BANG! \* Elia smacks the floor with a piece of cardboard.

41 Marnik is holding a large mirror in front of the screen when Emma brings him a chair, and together they hold the mirror in front of the webcam, while Stefan stands by and watches, holding a broom

in his hands. He then puts the broom aside and puts his hands in his pockets. Everyone is observing the screen. I leave.

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By 2:30 PM there is an overall tired atmosphere in the air. Marnik is lying down on the orange rope, using it as a hammock. Andrew and Alexia are by the window, talking, while Elia and Stefan are watching the screen. So is Emma, but she's sitting on the steps of the altar. Frans is standing on the steps, placed right in front of the screen, while he's busy with his phone. He is probably texting Steef about technical stuff – Steef's area of expertise. A search is a hard thing to do when you don't know what it is you're searching for. Or, in case what you're searching for is a gesture or an action that is potentially interesting, beautiful, or even art: how long the search should take. This is tiring, and it is tiring me. Yesterday I already let go of the idea that I must make sure not to miss anything,

but the slight fear that, even when I'm here, observing and writing, I'm missing things, is still very much present in me.

Alexia tells me that she's wearing a t-shirt with a print of a work by George Turlas. Yesterday, she wore a t-shirt with a print by someone else. This way, she says, she's hosting a kind of exhibition within *TheParallelShow*. She's also wearing a skirt she made herself. She often makes clothing. She's also made shirts, and she says that the collar of a shirt is the hardest thing to sew. It's like a kind of architecture. Andrew tells the story of his mother, who would remove collars when they got dirty, flip them round and sew them back in, as a way of saving money. Apparently, it's an old, frugal Scottish habit.

At 3:07, the chapel is emptied of stuff again, save for the little grey bench, on which Alexia and Emma are now sitting, with Frans across from them. There's a light-hearted discussion about where

Andrew should sit (he would like to). He's told he can just lean against a pillar. I'm told to sit in the windowsill and am busy doing so, when Elia and Marnik enter.

It's 3:35 when the chair and bench are moved aside again and Frans starts walking the perimeter of the chapel with a bucket of water. Alexia and Elia run from the altar-space to the screen in slow motion. Andrew watches them, as does Marnik, from the altar steps, when Andrew turns around and disappears. I'm still sitting in the windowsill when Frans passes by for the third time.

Less than a minute later Marnik is holding the bucket and passes by me. What happened to Frans?

Alexia and Elia are walking towards and away from the screen, while swinging their arms. The screen doesn't respond.

There's still an hour to go and Frans is back on the chair, with his bare feet on the edge of the bucket. I think I missed the part where he must have washed his feet in the bucket. Emma, sitting across from Frans on the bench, takes off her shoes and socks and sits back cross-legged. When Elia accidentally speaks to someone in Spanish, her mother tongue, Frans responds in Dutch. Andrew joins and everyone, by way of experiment, starts speaking to each other in their own language.

When this experiment falters after a few minutes, there's a kind of uncomfortable vibe in the room – as if everyone realises that there's still more performing to be done, while everyone is actually exhausted.

On the screen, it looks like the same has happened in Groningen. The last hour is mostly spent waiting around for it to turn 5:00, because that was the deal: it was going to end at 5:00 on the dot. Alexia takes out an inflatable sausage which she brought from Groningen, and starts walking

around the space with it. She jams it in between two small pillars in the choir aisle and asks me to take a picture. When I do, it's 5:00 PM and so the day is done.

We pack up and leave for Dordrecht.



# A Parallel Text

Sjoerd Westbroek

This text is the result of an assignment to write a reflection upon the eleventh and presumably final edition of *TheParallelShow*, a series of unannounced improvised performances taking place in a variety of exhibition spaces. This final edition was titled *GrandeFinale* and took place during one weekend at two locations: NP3 in Groningen and Greylight Projects in Brussels. These two spaces were connected by a webcam and video projection. The writer of this report was present on Saturday and Sunday from 10:00 to 17:00 in NP3 – on each of these days with one of the two groups, while the other group was in Brussels. Also, the group that was with me in NP3 on Saturday was projected here on a wall from the space in Brussels on Sunday, and vice-versa. In other words, the

people with whom I spent a full day on Saturday were on Sunday only visible to me as pixels moving in and out of the picture.

The parallel nature of earlier editions was due to the fact that participants were asked to improvise a performance in relation to exhibited objects and exhibition situations. No prior permission was requested for these performances, so that the actions were not necessarily understood as art performances by unsuspecting visitors – and thus unfolded within a parallel domain, in terms of their production as well as their reception. The idea of a parallel nature resulting from a doubling of the location, reinforced by the video link, was introduced for the first time in this final edition. The performers changed locations halfway through the weekend, working both in Groningen and in Brussels. However, since I was in NP3 on both days, the parallel space in Brussels existed to me only as a video projection. As a writing participant, I was clearly part of the situation which is the topic of this text. Still, I myself was an insider as well as an outsider in relation to the group of performers. The

notes which I took on location were destined to remain an invisible artefact, in contrast with the activities of the performers. The act of writing during the performances thus became mainly a moment of postponement, anticipating a process of interpretation that could only take place afterwards, in retrospect. Ironically, the focus of the project itself was in fact on an active presence in what was then the here and now, which for the participants may remain vaguely tangible in the blurry lines and shapes of their own memories, but which, partly through my written words, has now definitely been registered in the past.

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The main exhibition space of NP3 is separated from the street by a corridor on the north side. Entering the main space through the front door, one finds this corridor directly to the left. Behind the façade on the south side of the exhibition space is a garden. Entering through an opening on the

east side of the building, one encounters a space with a partly raised floor and large windows, giving a sense of being on an outward-facing stage. There were no artworks in the space, only our video and projection equipment, and a few pieces of furniture that could be moved around at will. The participants thus encountered three main conditions, which they could address and relate to in different ways: the space itself, the everyday objects within the space, and the video connection. This connection would play a very prominent role in the proceedings, and raised questions that could hardly be ignored. What is the meaning and effect of this virtual presence of another space? Also, what is the meaning of this parallel presence in relation to the parallel nature of previous editions? The physical relationship one can have with a space or object, and which can be explored through immediate movements, is made much more complex in the case of a projection. By touching a wall, a chair or a person, one immediately establishes contact. But how does one establish contact with a person who is only represented by a soundless projection, and who conversely sees you as no more than a pixelated apparition? Of course you can wave, and the other person will un-

derstand this as a sign of greeting that can be acknowledged. However, this all remains far removed from the exchange of conceptualised experiences which we commonly express through spoken language.

Several of the participants in NP3 began the search for their position within the whole by broadcasting such very basic signals. It may well be necessary to first remove all that is self-evident before one can actually start something new. The presence of the video projection demonstrated how in a certain sense the medium awakens our desire to communicate. There is a connection with another space; there is an image in which you see people performing activities, which may or may not be directed at the camera – and thus, by extension, at you. The connection is only made complete when both parties are involved in this connection as actively participating actors. Otherwise the relationship is destined to remain one-sided or unequal, as is the case with voyeurism for example. Social media may be able to sustain this desire for a longer period of time. This proved more diffi-

cult with the video projection in NP3. The presence of an image from somewhere else generated a desire for communication that could not be fulfilled in such a short time period. However, addressing the many questions which this raises about the effects of media would lead me to write a text that has little to do with the actual given situation, and so I will pursue this line of thought no further.

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The finale of *TheParallelShow* was thus an artistic experiment in which the camera played a key role. Still, the event was also very much about a group of artists working together in a physical space without necessarily being familiar with each other's prior work. A fundamental question, at times expressed more or less explicitly, and to me a recurring theme throughout the weekend, is how one can even begin to formulate a collective question statement while working from an improvisa-

tional perspective. The nature and the use of the space provided a shared point of reference in this regard. NP3 is an exhibition space, designed for showing artworks. However, if there are no artworks to be seen, how can we determine our position within such a space, on an individual as well as a collective level?

Earlier editions of *TheParallelShow* featured improvised performances in spaces which already included content – where artworks or other kinds of objects could be seen. The specific nature of these objects allows us to formulate a specific response, even if this response is not focused on the objects themselves, but rather on the specific details and conditions of how they are exhibited. The situation in NP3 thus raised the question of how to deal with an absence – an absence of specificity. One could of course argue that the space was already very much filled with its own characteristics, as well as the video projection and the objects within the space, thus providing a sufficient amount of material to work with. Even when there is nothing, there is still very much. And yet, something

was missing. NP3 is designed to be a space that provides the conditions for understanding objects and actions as works of art. This provides clarity, as well as a sense of direction in using the space to organise an exhibition or a performance. However, the conditions specified by an empty art space do not necessarily provide a concrete stimulus toward developing a strategy for individually or collectively filling this space. There were significant differences in this regard, not only between the individual performers, but also between the two groups. Some performers, using only a minimal amount of material, rather quickly arrived at that point where a performative action explores a relationship with the space, an object, or the projection. I saw bodies rolling over the ground, leaning against pieces of furniture, or placing them in unusual positions. In any case, this made it possible for participants to determine their own individual position on a rudimentary level. Still, several participants required other kinds of materials in order to arrive at this point – materials that were not always readily available. Throughout the two days, one clearly sensed a desire to bring inside something from outside: either something tangible, such as an everyday object or a draft of an artwork,

or something more ephemeral, such as a sound. At one point, someone had placed a glass jar filled with trash on a pedestal; someone else had hung paper birds from a transparent wire; and church bells ringing from elsewhere could be heard inside the space. Introducing external materials enabled a gesture which we as artists are continuously performing: the act of exhibiting. We take a thing, we exhibit it, and precisely this gesture allows us to relate to the conditions of the space, which of course exists in order to exhibit things. In a sense, we need this thing in order to address the conditions of the act of exhibiting.

An improvised performance in a museum filled with things would thus be fundamentally different from that which I have been witnessing here. In this regard it is not only the space itself, but also the things being exhibited that provide a framework and content to the actions taking place here, even if the attention of visitors is not primarily focused on these things. It is precisely in the attempt toward a common action that this framework and content provide a sense of direction. In muse-

ums, we encounter things that are there because someone has decided that it is important that this thing should be seen. This tangible form of intentionality within an exhibition provides a powerful motivation to relate to that which is being exhibited. Someone is telling us: this thing is worth looking at. By coming together around this thing, we generate a common point of focus. This greatly reduces the number of possible strategies for relating to one's location, which in turn makes it easier to understand each other, since there is much less of a need to explicitly describe everything. In this sense, the design of the NP3 space made it difficult to consider the video projection of the space in Brussels other than as a collective reference point, in addition to the already compelling presence that is characteristic of all moving images.

The mere fact of finding oneself in the same space with others by no means guarantees a satisfactory situation. The situation itself must also be meaningful in some regard. One should be able to relate to this situation from one's own individual thoughts and desires, and to gain something from

this relationship, knowing that our presence and our actions contribute to generating opportunities for others to do the same. An object, particularly an exhibited object, offers this possibility, precisely because it provides a point of focus – and this also applies to a situation in which it merely serves as an intermediate step for arriving elsewhere. As far as I could tell, the discussions I heard on Sunday in particular all focused on this aspect: determining what this point of orientation might be. Perhaps in such a case, the best – or at least the simplest – thing to do is to formulate some kind of agreement. In a sense, this was the strength of previous editions of *TheParallelShow*. It didn't seem to matter all that much where exactly these events took place – a variety of locations ranging from art museums to archaeological digging sites. The specific choice of location is, in all likelihood, more or less intuitive. This is not the case however for the situation brought about by such a choice, which may constitute a basic condition for a shared experience, which in turn gives direction to sharing individual experiences within that situation. Perhaps a better way of formulating this would be to say that the exhibited thing enables a mediation between individual and collective levels of

experience. And so, I found myself wondering whether the presence of an object in NP3 might have decreased the prevailing sense of separation between inside and outside. The space became an inside one, through the experience of an absence that might have been resolved by introducing something from outside the specific framework – from outside the walls of the space and the building.

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*TheParallelShow* is in a sense a parasitic project, since it generates a space for practitioners of improvised performance art to be active within a context that has been designed for this purpose. This potentially creates experiences that say something about the space or the exhibited objects, and thus also contribute something interesting in terms of content, though the primary function is still to investigate the nature of the space available for action within the specific context. The question statement is thus primarily artistic in nature, rather than intrinsically connected to the location. Per-

haps the finale in NP3 retroactively served to demonstrate how important the specific locations had been in enabling the investigations which constituted the previous ten editions. Perhaps these editions thus deserve to be placed on something of a pedestal – not as a goal, but as a driving force behind a process. Also, the earlier editions which took place in Groningen perhaps still remained as a collection of memories that resonated in the expectations and actions of the participants. The participants were instructed to come empty-handed – obviously in terms of physical objects – but from a more ephemeral perspective, participants still introduced a great deal of material into the space, such as their experiences and their expectations. Here too, the seemingly empty space was filled with things that may have merited more attention. Regardless of the specific instructions, perhaps the most important question in the end was thus: what do we actually bring with us when we enter a collective space?

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### **Greylight Projects, Brussels**

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writing artist: Michiel Huijben

### **Pictura, Dordrecht**

org: Theun Okkerse

cooking artist: Marielle Verdijk (Parallel Universe Dinner)

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