

No show for an audience – an interview with Frans van Lent

By [Maria Martens Serrano](#) - Wednesday, January 4, 2017

In the dynamic between artist-artwork-audience, the role of the audience is the most passive. We, the spectators, consume the work that the artist has created, but the relationship tends to be very one-sided. We look, we listen, we contemplate, we may even engage, but we rarely influence the art in return, and it's even rarer still for the audience to personify the artwork.

Dutch artist Frans van Lent considers the relationship between performance and spectatorship, in a series of actions that come together under the label of Unnoticed Art.



A person who is personifying an artwork is considered to be a *performer*. The performer's viewpoint is generally considered to be the opposite of the spectator's: the performer is *in it*, whilst the spectator only sees what is being presented. In such a dynamic, there are very clear limits that cannot be breached. To what extent can the audience relate to a performance, merely through watching? To what extent is the audience even a necessary component? If a performance takes place in the middle of the forest and there's no one there to see it...

These are the type of questions that arise when coming across the performance practices of Dutch artist Frans van Lent. His considerations on performance and spectatorship have resulted in a series of actions that come together under the label of Unnoticed Art. Imagine performances taking place in the public space, by single individuals or in groups, except no one around them knows that a performance is taking place, and the aim is precisely that: to remain unnoticed.

Frans van Lent organized the first Unnoticed Art Festival in 2014 – bringing together thirty artist concepts for unnoticed public performances, and a group of performer-volunteers to carry them out. The city of Haarlem had no idea that during one entire weekend, an art festival was taking place. This past year, the city of Nijmegen was equally oblivious, as the second Unnoticed Art Festival took place in June. In the time between the two festivals, van Lent created The Concept Bank, a website that serves as a databank for Unnoticed Art performance concepts, which artists can submit, and anyone can read through and choose to carry out, whenever and wherever they want. The counterpart to these efforts is The Parallel Show, a version of Unnoticed Art that is intended for “for colleagues, for people who work as artists”, van Lent explains. In this interview, we find out more about the conceptual foundations of Unnoticed Art, and its grounding in the often-overlooked details of every day life.

Artdependence Magazine: You mentioned in the first Unnoticed Art book that the aim of Unnoticed Art is to bridge the gap between performance and spectator by allowing the performance itself to become the consumption of the work. But you also mentioned that the people who are unknowingly present when Unnoticed Art takes place, themselves also perform a useful role.

Frans van Lent: Yes, their role is useful in its separation. Their role is useful by not being a part of the performance. So, the people who are unknowingly present turn the group of Unnoticed Art participants into a defined group. They form the borders of this group. Think about it this way: if you're walking around with twenty people in a completely empty square, you can do anything. If this square is completely filled with other people, and you're doing something that only twenty people are aware of, then you sense some sort of borders to what you're doing, because these other unknowing people are marking the outlines to what you're doing. They are not all participating, only the group of twenty are participating. This makes the twenty participants into a sort of secret group, you might say. And this awareness of being a secret group is something that is very stimulating for the people joining. The distance they have between themselves and the outside group.

AD: Can you elaborate on why this distance is so important? Is it so important because Unnoticed Art needs to take place in a daily life situation?

FvL: Yes, that's the difference, in fact. You can do certain acts in daily life, outside of the context of an artistic event, and then your actions are just what they are – there's nothing more to it than that. So Unnoticed Art is something that other people could pay some sort of attention to, or not; they are just doing their own thing and you're doing something else. In an extreme situation, people might probably think *this guy is a nutcase, I don't understand what he's doing*, and that's it.

When it comes to an *artistic* situation, then really every role is changing - there are a lot of possibilities to what you can do without crossing the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Because there is a sort of *modus*, a way of thinking and a way of working that is allowed in the context of an artistic situation.

So, what you use for Unnoticed Art, in fact, is this not-artistic situation - a situation that is just part of *your* experience, and not an experience that is meant for a public. In this way, Unnoticed Art is about *your* experience, just like carrying a heavy shopping bag is also your personal experience, nobody else's. So, there is not a frontal situation in the relation to an audience. There is only this personal experience of doing what you do – that's the main thing. And the separation between what you're doing, and what the outside world is doing is an important distinction to make, *in private*. Unnoticed Art is a sort of a private activity within a public atmosphere – that's how you could describe it.

AD: That's a good way to describe it. From this, two things stand out – first of all, the stage. At a certain point, performance work stepped off the theater stage, and now that it can take place anywhere, the location becomes a part of the concept.

FvL: Well, that's only a physical difference, because the attitude related to that may still remain the same. If you are doing a performance on stage, then you are preparing yourself to perform in front of an audience, and this audience is waiting to consume what you are doing. If you are doing performance off the stage - even if you're doing it on the street - if you are gathering your audience and you also confront this audience with what you're doing, then it's a comparable situation. Whether it's a stage or it's just a street – if you use the same sort of techniques (that is: gathering your audience in front of you, and making clear that you are going to do something to show them), then you are organizing a theatrical situation. It's still theatrical.

Unnoticed Art would be non-theatrical, meaning that you are not addressing these people in front of you, you're just doing what you are doing – maybe as a group, maybe solo, but you're doing what you are doing, and that's it.

AD: This relates to the second thing that stood out from before – the relation of these performances to some sort of “artistic life” principles. Are these performances in any way related to your idea of an artistic life, in the sense of personifying your work?

FvL: Well, I never really thought about the concept of an artistic life. I don't have a lot of feelings about this. But, what I think is very important is that Unnoticed Art relates to an attitude in which you look at the world. And I don't mean look at the world in a

political way, or how some people look at the world in a very physical way – it's more related to this concept of de-familiarization, of taking a step backwards and looking at the situation you are in, in a completely different way. So, in a way, that you are able to organize and understand relations in other configurations than how you normally would. And this (learning to look from other points of view) is something that is, in my opinion, very important for the way you live your life, and how you are in this world.

So, I think Unnoticed Art is important for that. I wouldn't call this an artistic way, even though it probably is, but it's not so in the sense that Unnoticed Art specifically becomes part of the artistic toolbox – it's just something that should be in the hands of people who are more aware of their situation, and who are trying to gain more understanding about their physical being-presence in this world.

AD: And obviously, this implies looking at very mundane aspects of life.

FvL: Yes – this is what we live with, these very mundane things we do.

AD: With Unnoticed Art, then, you get a direct connection between things that are very conceptual and things that are very basic.

FvL: Yes – things that are very physical and concrete. But you don't have the usual split that you see in art, where there is very often a divide between abstract and figurative thinking. Abstract as something more distant to the physical world, and figurative by way of a visual likeness to something that is concrete in this world. Unnoticed Art performances are something else – it is about a quality of being a human being. Unnoticed Art is about looking around and perceiving the world as something that is actually very physical, very real – and at the same time, you use your conceptual thinking to digest it, and to turn it around in your head and to experience it as something experimental.

AD: From these performances, it's obvious that the normal relies on a very careful balance of small adjustments – for example, with the performance *Doors* by Josh Schwebel (Unnoticed Art Festival 2014), of standing in a doorway, blocking other people's entrance. In this performance, just the fact that you're not moving is disruptive, depending on where you choose to linger.

FvL: And what's so beautiful about that (well, I personally think this is a beautiful thing) is that you are, in a way, *sculpting* – with these actions, you're sculpting the real space you're living. Schwebel's concept focuses on holding doors open and standing in the doorway. In doing so, your presence in these locations is interfering with a possible go-through. In this way, your positioning may force-lead people to move through other routes. They have to solve their passage in another way. Or they ask you to step aside, of course. When/if they ask you to let them through, you step aside politely. Still, with this performance you're actually physically sculpting the activity in space.

AD: Because it's so banal (in the sense that, by blocking some person's movement their life was affected for maybe 10 seconds of annoyance, and they probably don't even remember this moment by now), people might wonder about the significance of these performances.

FvL: The fact that this performance affects somebody else's life, even if just for ten seconds, is not even very important. Rather, what's important is your understanding with regards to the sculptural activity that you, as performer, are doing.

In this situation, the people who can't come through the door don't even know that you're doing a performance. These are the people who are the second public, you might say. What they think and what they experience is not the main thing in relation to the work. The main thing is the change that you – as performer - create in this situation. The direction of people, the users of the space, is what changes - not the people themselves as individuals, but the way that they move through the space. The focus is on how the performer achieves just that.

AD: You mentioned that each artist can take the concept of Unnoticed Art and interpret it in their own way. Say someone has an idea for a performance – what would make it part of Unnoticed Art? What would be the main elements that would make a performance an Unnoticed Art performance?

FvL: One of the most important characteristics is doing things in a non-artistic context. Not claiming the artistic context. In Unnoticed Art, you are not depending on this context. So, with Unnoticed Art you're just a human being doing something, and your actions are not excused because you are an artist doing things. That's the main thing.

So, in Unnoticed Art you're using these public situations, but you're using them just as a private person in the public. That's all.

AD: You also teach classes on conceptual development at the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam. Can you explain how you approach this subject?

FvL: Concept development is of course a very broad subject. My teaching focuses on developing a certain attitude, an experimental mentality, for finding intrinsic motivation. The work should not be directed and organised by the rules of somebody else. It should find its motivation in the desire to experiment, in the need to turn things (or situations) round and round and to experience how they relate.

There is this tradition of looking at other artists and at art history, in showing how other artists work. There is nothing wrong with that, but it puts the focus on something that you can look at, but you're not actually part of. And when students are studying the work of others, I advise them not to separate people by their status as professionals or non-professionals, but to distinguish only the intensity and quality with which people are experimenting - their willingness to question fixed positions. You can have an experimental approach as an artist or as a non-artist, it does not matter too much how your relation to art can be described. What really matters is motivation and mentality, and how you are in this world as a human being.

AD: How did the transition occur from the initial concept of the Unnoticed Art Festival (the first one in 2014), to developing The Concept Bank, and then The Parallel Show?

FvL: With the Unnoticed Art festival in 2014, I worked with the separation of concepts and execution for the first time. For the festival, there were the artists who were only

focusing on writing these manual-like concepts, and there were the people who participated by executing the performances. From this, one of the aspects that really intrigued me was the sort of bond between artist and performer: these are people who don't know each other and they really have to trust each other, in a way. The artist has to trust the one who is executing, because he has the ability to really fuck up the work, and the person who is executing the work has to trust that the artist is being serious in the sometimes cryptic and eccentric requests he makes. This bond of trust was something that I thought was very beautiful.

Then I thought that I could make an organized structure for Unnoticed Art. So I started with The Concept Bank. This website is a databank for artists, who can submit their concepts, and it's possible for anyone to visit the site and choose a performance concept to execute. It's completely a sort of open source situation related to these performance concepts. For me, that move was about making an important aspect of the Unnoticed Art Festival very concrete.

And then we have The Parallel Show, which is not meant for anyone in the same way that the Unnoticed Art festivals and The Concept Bank are open for anyone – instead, The Parallel show is for colleagues, for people who work as artists.

To go into the purpose of The Parallel Show, I would refer to the exhibition *When Attitudes Becomes Form*, first shown in Bern in 1969, and recreated in 2013 for the Venice Biennale. This show really changed the attitude towards exhibiting art, because it took away all the material to show art in a theatrical way: that is, showing art to an audience that came to look at art. This exhibition used the floor in the rooms, making the audience a part of the work, instead of being apart from the work. Instead of just looking at the work you were in it, or somewhere in between. And this really changed the attitude towards art and the attitude of artists making art, and the attitude towards the audience. And, in a way, I think this show might have been an important background influence, to start with The Parallel Show.

In the Parallel Show you have different aspects that play a very important role:

- the art that is shown in the exhibitions
- the audience that is walking around, and the attendants that are looking at all behaviors
- the architectural situation

What *really* changed my personal way of looking at art, apart from this exhibition, is a memory from when I was younger, of a moment when I walked into a gallery in a museum, and it was quiet and there were all these works of art present, and I immediately felt like I was a part of these works. I would now describe this as feeling like I was performing instead of walking in an art space and looking at art – feeling like I'm a part of what is actually happening, mixed among the mix of these different, separate aspects of the museum's existence. It all mixes together - the art, and the way it's shown, and the audience, and the attendants, and so on, and it becomes one big performative situation. And this is what we are working with during each Parallel Show.

For instance, we were in Valencia for the Parallel Show Number 8. There was the big installation *Les Tombeaux* of Christian Boltanski, which had a lot of light bulbs hanging from the ceiling. One of the artists participating (Joana Mollà) wanted to just touch these bulbs, so that they would start moving, and so that the whole installation

would acquire movement and come to life for a very short time. So we did that – very carefully, I must add, because the work is always carried out with a lot of respect – and then we got some attention from the attendants, who started following us. And so we led the attendants through the space, and everybody and everything connects in this way.

There is only one rule in The Parallel Show and that involves not changing anything, not leaving any traces. That's the main thing. You have to respect every situation. But it's really one big performance, and all these aspects of the museum are part of it. They are part of it also because nobody knows that we are there. We just buy our tickets at the entrance, nobody knows that we are coming as artists, and we are just trying out all the borderlines of what is possible and what is not possible.

AD: Could you explain in more detail how you carry out a Parallel Show?

FvL: What we do is the following: we come at opening time, we have a cup of coffee together, we buy the tickets, then we go inside and then everybody starts to walk around individually, looking at every aspect of the museum: the exhibitions but also the architecture, and so on. At lunch time we come together in the restaurant, we have lunch together, and we discuss what's possible, what sort of ideas we could execute and what not. After lunch we set off to do those things, and then at closing time we are leaving. During closing time there may be some attendants who might be puzzled about what was happening - and that's all. And finally when all participants submit their individual reports and I upload these on the website, then I send a formal letter to the director of the museum to thank him or her for their hospitality, even though they did not know they were being hospitable.

The last Parallel Show is due to take place on January 8th, in an undisclosed location. For more information visit www.theparallelshow.com

Top image:
Standing next to the work Modern Tower 8
by Julian Opie
in IVAM, Valencia
(The Parallel Show #8)
Images courtesy of the artist

www.fransvanlent.nl
www.unnoticedart.com
www.theconceptbank.org
www.theparallelshow.com

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