
Wendelien van Oldenborgh: 'The past is never dead. It's not even past.'

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Wendelien
van Oldenborgh,
Polyphonic Stage
(part of *A Certain*
Brazilianness), 2005,
web-based video,
no fixed duration.
Production still,
Parasite, Hoogvliet.
Architect: ONIX.
Courtesy the artist
and Wilfried Lentz
Rotterdam

Wendelien van Oldenborgh: 'The past is never dead. It's not even past.'

– Emily Pethick

In a recent critique of the current neo-liberalism at work in the UK, cultural theorist Stuart Hall concludes with a reflection on how this form of hegemony has 'constantly to be worked on, maintained, renewed, revised'.¹ He continues, 'Excluded social forces, whose consent has not been won, whose interests have not been taken into account, form the basis of counter-movements, resistance, alternative strategies and visions.' Thus, 'history is never closed but maintains an open horizon towards the future' – it may always be contested and reshaped. This passage

Emily Pethick traces the merging of past and present, audience and actor in Wendelien van Oldenborgh's re-stagings of historical events.

strikes a chord with the preoccupations of Dutch artist Wendelien van Oldenborgh, who for some time has been developing a body of film and slide works that deal in different capacities with repressed, incomplete and unresolved histories. In particular her work has focused on Dutch colonial histories, and their lingering presence in present-day politics and society, looking at whose voices are heard and whose are not represented. In the context of shifting conditions of multiculturalism in the Netherlands today, where populist, right-wing factions are gaining increasing influence and have been stirring up tensions around race relations and questions of immigration, van Oldenborgh's project has particular resonance and urgency.²

To carry out this enquiry van Oldenborgh has developed methodologies for production that oppose the notion of a fixed or singular history or identity, constructing open frameworks that incorporate more than one voice, an approach that she has described as 'polyphonic'.³ Aspects of these methodologies have been drawn from looking at Brazilian culture, where heterogeneity and conflict were seen as productive forces in the creation of a new, postcolonial national identity in the wake of former oppression. Accomplished over numerous stages of activity and production, her project *A Certain Brazilianness (A C.B.)* (2005–06) looked towards the Brazilian modernist movements to find a means to blur subjectivities and fixed identities, thinking in particular about how to deconstruct nationalist identities. A key reference for this was Antropofagia, a cultural strategy first coined in 1928 by the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade as a counter-concept to the elitism of his country's European colonisers. Based upon the cannibalism of the Tupi Indians, who ate their enemies in order to appropriate their talents and powers, Antropofagia was incorporative and collapsed existing power relations, hierarchies and separations – between coloniser and colonised, self and other, and so forth. *A C.B.* participant Maria Moreira described the practice as

the experience of repersonalisation, which is based on the cultural attitude of establishing zones of contagion, where code-mixing occurs, around secret nuclei, where the difference

1 Stuart Hall, 'The March of the Neoliberals,' *The Guardian*, G2, 13 September 2011, p.12.

2 Geert Wilders's far-right-wing Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid, PVV) is the third largest party in the Netherlands, and has xenophobic tendencies. Wilders has summed up his views by saying, 'I don't hate Muslims, I hate their book and their ideology.' See Ian Traynor, 'I don't hate Muslims. I hate Islam', *The Observer*, 17 February 2008. The current cabinet under Prime Minister Mark Rutte formed in 2010, and is a minority cabinet of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, VVD) and the Christian Democratic Appeal (Christen-Democratisch Appèl, CDA); Wilders actively participated in the negotiations, resulting in a 'support agreement' (*gedoogakkoord*) between the PVV and these parties.

3 For references to 'polyphony' see the website developed to accompany the project *A C.B.* <http://www.acertainbrazilianness.net/htmlpages/introduction.html> (last accessed on 14 November 2011).



between one culture and another is renourished.⁴

A C B_ absorbed these tendencies as the basis of methodologies for film production. The work was realised through a series of stages, with each involving a group of invited contributors and establishing non-hierarchical ways of working.

In the second part of *A C B_ — Polyphonic Stage* (2005) — a group of artists, writers and musicians encountered one another in a one-day event in a building in a playground on the outskirts of Rotterdam.⁵ The interior was reconfigured for the event by the architect Milica Topalovic, who used the house of Brazilian High Priestess Tia Ciata as a spatial and social model,⁶ breaking the building into three zones where different ‘scenes’ could take place simultaneously. During

the event, each participant contributed his or her own skills and expertise — including rapping, writing, architecture and performance — with the different roles and types of actions influencing and feeding into one another. Fragmented extracts of the contributions in the form of film clips and quotations were later assembled on a website, www.acertainbrazilianness.com, that can be navigated nonlinearly, allowing for multiple pathways, narratives and lines of thought. In one clip, artist Imogen Stidworthy describes the form of polyphony produced through the events as ‘a layering of different sounds, but also different elements, coexisting, but in their difference and never collapsing into a single kind of unified, harmonic whole’.⁷

These strategies of feedback and contagion fed into the development of the

Wendelien van Oldenborgh, *Maurits Script*, 2006, video installation with two projections, language English, 67min, still

4 Maria Moreira, ‘Rigor/Resonance + Art as confrontation’, *ITEM* 5, 2002. Also available at <http://www.acertainbrazilianness.net/htmlpages/rigor.html> (last accessed on 14 October 2011).

5 The participants in the *Polyphonic Stage* were Ricardo Basbaum, Winston Belliot, Mario Campanella, Gio Doemoeng, Paul Domela, Corinne Gambi, Milford Kendall, Maria Moreira, Imogen Stidworthy, Milica Topalovic, Ari Versluis and Florian Wüst.

6 ‘A priestess for the Afro-Brazilian cult of Camdoblé-Nagô, Tia Ciata lived in Rio de Janeiro from 1876 to 1924. She was a central figure in the newly liberated black community, which was making the passage from a condition of slavery into the hardness of becoming, as a class, the economically dispossessed [...] When analysing the plan for Tia Ciata’s house at Visconde de Itaúna St, the last of the two addresses she had in her adult life, I understood the model of “conflict-with-no-exclusion-of the other” could be retraced as a collective performance, read directly from the space, just by following the positioning of the various activities on offer to the guests.’ M. Moiera, ‘Urban Image as Otherness’, available at http://www.acertainbrazilianness.net/htmlpages/urban_image01.html (last accessed on 14 October 2011).

7 Quoted from <http://www.acertainbrazilianness.net/htmlpages/script1.html> (last accessed on 14 October 2011).



Maurits Script, 2006. Production still; Nienke Terpsma. Both images courtesy the artist and Wilfried Lentz Rotterdam

third stage of *A.C.B.*,⁸ the two-channel film *Maurits Script* (2006), which took the Dutch colonial past in northeast Brazil as a starting point, a history that is frequently overlooked in the Netherlands. Van Oldenborgh constructed a script around the figure of Johan Maurits van Nassau, the Dutch governor there from 1637 to 1644, who is highly regarded by the Dutch as an early humanist ruler. In her research of both official and more informal materials, van Oldenborgh found many discrepancies in the ways in which the period had been documented. Compiled from sources ranging from personal letters to political council minutes,⁹ the resulting script painted a complex portrait of the conflicts of the time, including tensions between Portuguese and Dutch colonisers, and the less recognised aspects of Maurits's governance, such as his treatment of slaves and the indigenous population. As van Oldenborgh describes, "The reading of the historical words opens up a space for other voices, the voices that perhaps did not write history."¹⁰

Filming at a one-day public event in the opulent Golden Room of the Mauritshuis museum (Maurits's former residence in The Hague), van Oldenborgh cast a group of participants who each had a different personal relationship to the issues raised in the script and represented two characters.¹¹ On one side of the room the actors individually read their lines before a single, unmoving camera, on the other side the rest of the actors engaged in an ongoing conversation around a table. In the discussion they addressed the legacies of colonial histories within contemporary Dutch society, in particular in relation to citizenship and multiculturalism — again revealing at times conflicting viewpoints. Throughout the day the conversation took on a momentum of its own, spreading to involve the camera crew and the audience. Van Oldenborgh reflects:

The audience becomes part of the performance, and the performers, viewers and listeners as well as actors. [...] Their willingness and interest to engage in

8 The final part of the *A.C.B.* project was *Sound Track Stage* (2006–08).

9 Other sources were reports from the Dutch West India Company, chronicles of a Portuguese friar and letters from Johan Maurits.

10 Wendelien van Oldenborgh, 'Retouching Some Real with Some Real', *Casco Issues X*, Utrecht: Casco, Office for Art, Design and Theory, 2007, p.72.

11 The participants in *Maurits Script* were Mario Campanella, Anthony Clarke, Romeo K. Gambier, Eunice Landvreugd, Charl Landvreugd, Cristiane de Moraes, Peter Olsthoorn, Nienke Terpsma and Alexander Vollebregt.

reading the given roles and in the act of conversation [gives] life and directness to the event. They play with their awareness of the camera, the audience and the passers-by. The point is not to direct the situation, but to direct oneself within it — a process that can be induced, but not controlled.¹²

The unravelling of these multiple accounts at the heart of the museum creates hybrid counter-narratives to the ‘official story’, and addresses the unspoken conditions under which the building itself and parts of the museum’s collection were produced. During the filming, the museum’s everyday routines continued, including a guided tour that kept to its usual route, passing straight through the shoot. Captured on camera, the guide brings the museum’s official narrative into the film, further complicating the layering of insider and outsider positions, and creating an ambiguity as to whether the ‘real’ has entered the ‘unreal’ (of the film set), or vice versa. In the resulting film installation the script and the conversation are played simultaneously on two screens, interweaving the composed script and the free-form conversation (a second script), as well as unscripted, unspoken incidents. The two pictures resist resolution, individually and as a pair. By occupying the museum space in a quasi-legitimate way and unearthing poignant reflections on the legacies of the institution’s history in contemporary society, van Oldenborgh created what could be described as a mode of ‘embodied criticality’, which Irit Rogoff has described as inhabited — ‘a state from which one cannot exit or gain a critical distance’¹³ — but which has to be lived through in the present — a critique from within.

Towards the end of the conversation the cast members discuss how the term ‘allochtoon’, which translates as ‘originating from another country’, has remained in use in the Dutch language, even in relation

to second-generation immigrants. Van Oldenborgh’s two-channel film production *No False Echoes* (2008) furthers her investigation into the Dutch way of handling ‘otherness’ by looking at a second Dutch colonial period in the former East Indies. The film was produced in a one-day shoot situated in the isolated, empty, 1920s building of the former Radio Kootwijk in Holland. During the late 1920s and 30s Phillips Broadcasting Company Holland-Indies (PHOHI) broadcasted radio to the East Indies, which at the time was carefully preventing any unwanted voices or ideas from being aired, in particular signs of the burgeoning nationalist ideology from Indonesian republicans.

The film begins with a tracking shot of the façade of the modernist concrete building of Radio Kootwijk, its monumentality reflecting the powerful position of the Netherlands in the early twentieth century. This is countered through the central presence of the 1913 text ‘If I Were a Dutchman’, by the Indonesian nationalist Soewardi Soerjaningrat, published in a Dutch-language daily newspaper from the East Indies called *De Expres*,¹⁴ which protested against the Dutch Colonial Government’s plan to celebrate one hundred years of Dutch Independence. Soerjaningrat imagined himself in the place of the oppressor, celebrating independence in a country deprived of its national identity; his text explores the paradoxes and ironies within the Dutch position, elegantly flipping between identities of oppressed and oppressor. In van Oldenborgh’s staging, the text is delivered for the camera from the roof of the Kootwijk building by the Dutch rapper Salah Edin, overlooking the wild landscape of the surrounding nature park. Like Soerjaningrat, Edin has been openly critical of race relations in the Netherlands, and has had run-ins with its current nationalist right wing.¹⁵ His emotive rendition, given from

12 W. van Oldenborgh, ‘Retouching Some Real with Some Real’, *op. cit.*, p.70.

13 Irit Rogoff, ‘Smuggling: An Embodied Criticality’, 2006. Available at <http://www.eicpc.net/dlfiles/rogoff-smuggling> (last accessed on 14 October 2011).

14 The text was first published in *De Expres*, founded in 1912 by Ernest Douwes Dekker, an activist for Indonesian independence, together with Soewardi Soerjaningrat and Tjpto Mangunkusumo. Just after, it was also translated into Malay, and published in two languages as an independent pamphlet by them. In this way it suddenly [had] a much larger audience and the problem started for the group. Soewardi and Tjpto were exiled without a trial. Ernest Douwes Dekker was treated differently (since he was a Euro-Asian), and had a proper hearing. I have been able to study an original pamphlet kept in the Leiden University Library.’ Email from the artist, 31 October 2011.

15 Salah Edin’s 2007 song and video ‘Het Land Van’ (‘The Land Of’) riffed on a song with the same title by a duo of Dutch white rappers who promoted the Netherlands as a country of sharing and happiness. Edin named all the bad qualities of the Netherlands, including intolerance towards young Islamic males like himself. Two days before the shooting of *No False Echoes*, it emerged that in his film *Fitna* (2008) Geert Wilders had used Edin’s image as that of Mohammed Bouyeri, the murderer of Theo van Gogh. The source of the inaccurate image was the cover art of Edin’s album *Nederlands Grootste Nachtmerrrie*, which pictures the rapper in a white T-shirt ironically co-opting the pose of an image of Bouyeri.



Wendelien van Oldenborgh, *No False Echoes*, 2008, video, language Dutch, English subtitles, 30min, still. Courtesy the artist and Wilfried Lentz Rotterdam

outside of the building, is interspersed with excerpts from a conversation taking place inside among a group of invited speakers, which is broadcast to a listening audience below.¹⁶

Among the speakers was social philosopher Baukje Prins, who contextualises the history of PHOHI and the role of radio in the rise of Indonesian nationalism in the early twentieth century (before independence was finally reached in 1945). She gives an account of how the Dutch sectarianism of the 1920s sought to pacify religious and ideological conflicts, moving on to describe the shift away from this in contemporary society due to fears of giving space to Islam. Here the story of the one-way broadcast that denied the voice of the other not only offers a lens through which to read the relations embedded within this imperial history, it also finds an echo in the present in reductive projections on the ‘Muslim other’. In Edin’s case, for example, both these vectors of past and present are countered via a polyphonic methodology that lets diverse voices and positions into the frame.

The film’s tensions are spatialised in the use of interior and exterior spaces.

The camera closely follows the speakers, and regularly pans out to show groups of quiet listeners populating the tiled floor of the cavernous station — the revisitation of this history also being about bringing visitors into this temple of bygone colonialism. Towards the end of the film the audience clustered around a young girl (van Oldenborgh’s daughter), who sang the Indonesian lullaby ‘Nina Bobo’, now popular in the Netherlands, which she had learned in school. The film installation captures her soft voice echoing and reverberating around the empty hall, bringing to the fore a fragment of Indonesian heritage that has been absorbed into Dutch culture.

Where *No False Echoes* picks up on stirrings of discontent in an oppressed nation and the resonances of this history within the present day, van Oldenborgh’s film *Instruction* (2009) explores the atrocities that occurred during the Indonesian War of Independence (1945–49). Its source material includes texts from a 1969 Dutch television series that asked, for the first time, questions about untried war crimes, as well as airing the account of a younger soldier who later had misgivings about his involvement, and excerpts

¹⁶ The participants in the conversation were Baukje Prins; Wim Noordhoek, a radio producer; and Edwin Jurriëns, a lecturer on Indonesian language and culture.



from a biography of one of the most violent Dutch captains engaged in the war. These are set against the more personal voice of a travelogue written by the artist's mother in the 1980s, on her first return to the former colony, where she had spent part of her childhood in an internment camp during World War II. (She had been captured by the Japanese army when it invaded the archipelago in the early 1940s.) Her lighter, more anecdotal tone, read out by one of the male cadets, describes the flora and fauna of Indonesia and the changes to formerly familiar places, showing an awareness of the shifts in relations among local people no longer under colonial rule.

Again, van Oldenborgh's methodology was to infiltrate a site that is infused with the problematics of the subjects in question, in this case the Royal Military Academy of the Netherlands. Here she worked with a group of young cadets who, in full uniform, narrate and comment on a script compiled from excerpts of the source material. The cadets pace through the long corridors, stairwells and courtyards of the Academy building, reading and discussing the texts, and occupying lecture rooms, where they work through the script and further discuss it, inscribing key dates on whiteboards. The film concludes with a conversation among the cadets in which

they try to digest and find their positions on the harsh realities of the Dutch conduct that they had been confronted with not long before the shoot. Discomfited, they appear not to know how to talk about these subjects, embodying the repression of a country and the awkward mess of unresolved colonisation. Moreover, with her mother's voice present in the script van Oldenborgh's own personal narrative is embedded within the postcolonial politics of the Netherlands.

Similarly, the title *Instruction* not only addresses questions of ethics and accountability when acting under orders, but also suggests the way in which actors must follow orders during the process of film-making — van Oldenborgh herself having issued the cadets a set of instructions to guide their participation. But the framework can only be set to a certain extent, as what enters the frame cannot be wholly planned or controlled (although, of course, it may be edited out). The approach of opening up to and including the voices of others elicits engagement and responsiveness between two or more participants, a methodology that is well described by the artist (and participant in *A C_B_*) Ricardo Basbaum:

'Conversations' are a way of thinking, where the self opens to the outside,

Wendelien van Oldenborgh, *No False Echoes*, 2008, video, language Dutch, English subtitles, 30min, still. Courtesy the artist and Wilfried Lentz Rotterdam

producing a special social space where no single language of truth is prevalent. It enables the transformation of the voice of the other [...] ‘Conversations’ are a sort of dialogue that have their own dynamics, always surprising the participants [...] a permanent state of awareness and change (flexibility) [...] when they finish a particular dialogue — they just cannot go back to the same places they left before (some transformation might have happened). Therefore, ‘conversation’ is a modality of movement.¹⁷

Conversation necessitates a voice, a space to speak and to be heard, which van Oldenborgh’s work shows cannot be taken for granted. By looking at moments of repression, suppression and oppression — be that of voices or histories — in each case van Oldenborgh throws light on the present. *A Certain Brazilianness, No False Echoes and Instruction*, in particular, indirectly reflect on recent social and political developments in the Netherlands,

Van Oldenborgh not only sets up the possibility for meeting, working collectively and exchanging, she also acknowledges the conflicts, disagreements, paradoxes and complexities that are produced within social encounters.

where a long history of ‘tolerance’ is fast being eclipsed by the increasing influence of the populist nationalist right wing. Van Oldenborgh’s most recent slide/audio work, *Supposing I love you. And you also love me* (2011), brings this context into sharper focus through two separately filmed, unrehearsed contributions by the Swiss-Egyptian philosopher and theologian Tariq Ramadan and a group of five Dutch and Belgian secondary school students of diverse ethnic backgrounds.

The protagonists are shot in modernist, institutional interiors. Ramadan is at the Royal College of Art in London, where he is shown sitting in the lecture theatre watching footage of the students, as well as standing and talking in the intermediary spaces of corridors and a stairwell. His

(still) image shifts in and out of focus, captured indirectly through reflections in the surrounding windows, with his presence more strongly encountered through his voice. The students are pictured in a colourful De Stijl-inspired broadcast building, informally gathering in corridors and canteens and in recording studios where they improvise with musical instruments. The two parts are delicately interwoven, and treated without hierarchy: Ramadan’s more measured tone is juxtaposed with the spontaneous dialogue of the young people, and the images fade in and out of one another between the different sites.

Recounting his experience of being invited to work on a project in Rotterdam about citizenship, diversity, education and the job market, Ramadan describes how the university came under pressure to ‘remove his voice’, which was perceived as ‘problematic within society’. Meanwhile the students exchange thoughts on questions of difference, with one Muslim girl revealing how a teacher had announced to her class that wearing headscarves created an ‘atmosphere of danger’, which left the girl ‘totally speechless’. Another girl tells a more extreme story of how her parents were murdered in Angola due to their political positions. Watching documentation of the students’ exchanges, Ramadan comments on what they say, and feeds back, summing up the subtleties and consequences of such ‘fear’:

*to deny the existence of the other
[...] to deny what we don’t like in the other
[...] you are talking but you are not heard
[...] you know it’s not a physical suppression, but it is: we don’t hear you
[...] say whatever you want to say, but whatever you say it doesn’t matter.
You are either not heard or something else is heard.*

Highlighting both the silent and overt signs of racism and oppression within Dutch and Belgian society and moments in which individual freedoms are put under pressure or closed down, the film does not point to an obvious solution. However, the more relaxed convivial behaviour of the young people could be seen to chime with Paul Domela’s description of a new conviviality

17 Ricardo Basbaum, *Re-projecting (Utrecht)*, Utrecht: Casco, Office for Art, Design and Theory, 2008, p.11.



on the *A C B* online archive, which he writes ‘will not come from the official – antagonising – “Islam debatten” [debates] but from the street: sports, music, trends, [which] is where new identifications are tested and lived.’¹⁸ In fact, in contrast to Ramadan’s more cautious tone, when asked ‘what do you do with your voice?’, one of the students exclaims, ‘I laugh, I speak, I can be heard.’

Returning to Antropofagia, Brazilian theorist Suely Rolnik has described how contained within this movement is a ‘detachment and the freedom to rid oneself of elements of one’s own culture, to absorb elements from others, and also to dismiss them when they seem to lose significance’ – a fluidity that she sees partly as a response to ‘the need to come to grips with and render positive the process of hybridisation brought by successive waves of immigration, which has always defined the country’s experience’.¹⁹ Here it is hard not to see the contrast between, on the one hand, this professed openness to adapting and absorbing outside influences, and, on the other, the Dutch model of ‘tolerance’ as a form of multiculturalism that can be read as an avoidance and indifference to

the other – one that sustains established power relations between the ‘tolerator’ and ‘tolerated’. Furthermore, the Dutch and Belgian models of pillarisation – a term used to describe the ‘vertical’ division of society into segments or ‘pillars’, according to different religions or ideologies that do not touch one another – could not be further away from cannibalism. Then again, one cannot look at the Brazilian model of fluidity without acknowledging that it comes from a highly unequal society, with massive gulfs between rich and poor, and its own fair share of racism. By drawing out and working with concepts that lead out of the Brazilian model, and reading one culture against another, van Oldenborgh sidesteps romanticism, creating tools with which to think through and understand the position of the Netherlands – not to mention wider Europe – that can be employed in order to activate other kinds of social logic, bringing people who would not ordinarily meet into conversation.

It is within the conversational that one faces and engages with the other. In her work, van Oldenborgh not only sets up the possibility for meeting, working collectively

Wendelien van Oldenborgh, *Instruction*, 2009, video, language Dutch, English subtitles, 30min, still

18 Paul Domela, ‘Resounding Conviviality’, available at http://www.acertainbrazilianness.net/htmlpages/resounding_conviviality.html (last accessed on 17 October 2011).

19 Suely Rolnik, ‘Avoiding False Problems: Politics of the Fluid, Hybrid and Flexible’ (trans. Rodrigo Nunes), *e-flux journal*, issue 25, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/230> (last accessed on 4 December 2011).



Instruction, 2009.
Installation view:
11th Istanbul
Biennial, 2009.
Photograph: Bárbara
Wagner. Both images
courtesy the artist
and Wilfried Lentz
Rotterdam

and exchanging, she also acknowledges the conflicts, disagreements, paradoxes and complexities that are produced within social encounters. The act of bringing together multiple voices in polyphonic situations, and the formation of aggregates of knowledge from diverse sources, creates densely layered perspectives that problematise the stability of singular, hegemonic narratives. This method of production involves the risk of letting go and allowing for multiple voices to be heard, giving the possibility to move beyond what one can do alone, to surpass expectations and create the tensions and sparks that arise through bringing people into contact. This approach is matched in the way in which the works are filmed — using high-definition, slow, cinematic camera-work that pays close attention to the lead protagonists — to always include a wider context and allow the presence of unexpected events, cameras, film-crew members and equipment to enter into the picture.

Through these methods, van Oldenborgh finds a powerful way of approaching problems, knowledge and experiences that are still in the process of being thought about and lived through, that need to be reconsidered, that resist

easy resolution and that cannot be contained but need to be discussed and shared— as Stuart Hall describes, ‘maintaining an open horizon towards the future’.²⁰ As the film *Instruction* begins, ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past.’

20 S. Hall, ‘The March of the Neoliberals’, *op. cit.*