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## **On the Threshold: Artists, Residents and Urban Renewal**

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### **Introduction**

Although I have visited Utrecht, I have never been to Overvecht, so *Perfect Day* and *Overvecht between about '64 and '76* are, for me, depictions of an unfamiliar place. Nonetheless, I experience a sense of recognition while viewing these films, because they recall – and exist in dialogue with – many artworks that seek to critically engage with the past, present and future of cities. Like many contemporary artists and designers, Renée Kool and Neeltje ten Westenend do not work in isolation, but rather draw upon the experience and knowledge of residents, urban planners, policy-makers, historians, sociologist and architects. In this essay I examine their approaches to research and filmmaking, and situate their work in relation to projects undertaken in a variety of contexts, in the Netherlands, Europe and the US. I also consider how artworks such as *Perfect Day* and *Overvecht between about '64 and '76* might inform analysis of the relationship between architecture, popular culture and urban experience. In particular I want to explore the different ways in which these films consider not only the impact of urban design, architecture and planning on everyday experience, but also the role played by memory, ritual and media images in articulating and structuring this experience.

In 2007-2008 Overvecht was on the threshold of major urban renewal, intended to involve the demolition of most of the ten storey housing blocks. Artist Renée Kool and designer Neeltje ten Westenend were

commissioned to undertake projects in the context of this process, and both spent time in residence at Overvecht. The notion of being ‘on the threshold’ is particularly appropriate to the works that they created because it suggests an orientation towards the future, with a sense of anticipation and perhaps uncertainty. The term ‘threshold’ is a word strongly linked to domestic space, typically understood as a mundane and everyday realm, yet it also evokes ritual and supernatural associations. So, for example, a newly married husband might attempt to carry his bride over the threshold at the start of their honeymoon or a dramatic narrative featuring vampires (such as the critically acclaimed Swedish film *Let the Right One In*, directed by Tomas Alfredson, 2008) might focus on the threshold as barrier between the living and the dead. It is also possible to consider the term as simply marking a transition from one state to another. Now that the plans for the renewal of Overvecht have altered, *Perfect Day* and *Overvecht between about '64 and '76* are linked both to the past and to the future. They exist at a point of transition, full of potential and deliberately without resolution. Both works obviously share a focus on time – as suggested by their titles – yet a closer analysis reveals important differences in their treatment of this theme.

*Perfect Day* derives its structure from the rhythms of daily life, and in this sense is somewhat similar to the early ‘city symphony’ films of the 1920s, such as *Berlin: Symphony of the City* (directed by Walter Ruttmann in 1927). Depicting city streets criss-crossed by train tracks and telephone lines, Ruttmann’s film emphasises the speed and chaos of modern urban life while also suggesting a sense of order, and pattern, by tracing the passage of time from early morning to evening. Ten Westenend spent six weeks in a sixth floor flat at Overvecht, and conducted a series of interviews (in collaboration with designer Henriette Waal), gathering information on daily life. She was often invited into the homes of residents, many of whom were keen to share their experience and show the view from their apartment, and the film is strongly attuned to spatial concerns. This sensitivity to spatiality is evident in the precise and fluid movements of the camera, soaring above the building to emphasise the formal harmony of the architecture, and in the choreography of

actions on the ground, often depicted from the perspective of high rise residents. Ultimately, however, the structure of *Perfect Day* is dictated by an exploration of time – creating a sense of order and meaning from the irresistible and reassuring rhythms of the natural world and from the routines established by the occupants and workers of Overvecht, disclosed during interviews and conversations. In *Perfect Day*, just like Ruttman’s film, day begins and time advances forward slowly and steadily towards dusk and nightfall. But this familiar structure is complicated by the decision to utilise elements of fiction and to incorporate cyclical elements derived from the annual, seasonal and festival calendar. So the annual ‘plant day’, the neighbourhood party, the regular maintenance of the grounds by Council workers, and migrations of the birds, are all telescoped into one ‘perfect day’ at Overvecht. This exploration of cyclicity is further intensified, formally, by moments of choreography – such as a scene in which two lawnmowers, viewed from above in perfect symmetry, briefly circle each other before moving on.

*Overvecht between about '64 and '76* initially seems to be far less concerned with rhythms and routines of everyday life, focusing instead upon the history of Overvecht in its early years. Rather than depicting the housing complex as it appears today, Kool’s film uses text and image to explore the various ways in which it might have been perceived and experienced in its early years, by residents as well as architects, urban planners and sociologists. The film includes onscreen quotations from the architect Hugh Maaskant and from reports by social organisations such as the Association for the Protection of Infants, which emphasise that Overvecht was initially populated by many young families. Several sources allude to broader changes in Dutch society during this period, such as increased consumption of leisure and domestic goods (including cars, domestic appliances and TV sets). Kool also creates a computer visualisation of the housing complex so that the camera can move fluidly through wide and empty streets, under bridges, and across open spaces.. As a counterpoint to this perspective, *Overvecht between about '64 and '76* also features photographs and home movie footage derived from the personal collections of residents.

Through the use of montage and image compositing techniques these diverse elements are integrated so that, at certain moments, the model version of Overvecht is briefly animated by the presence of residents.

Kool's film incorporates clips from radio advertisements for natural gas, featuring a domestic exchange with clearly defined roles for husband and wife, and the inclusion of advertising media lends a degree of ambiguity to the photographic material so that it becomes difficult to classify. For example, the shots of the fashionable young woman on the balcony and of the child wearing headphones might easily have been posed by models or actors, and drawn from advertising or instructional sources. It is possible to confuse these private photographs with ads simply because, as viewers, our historical consciousness of this period is partly shaped by our experience of advertising. By including these photographs, Kool underlines the fact that Overvecht itself was a *model* development. The notion of modelling, in this context, refers both to the promotion and to the analysis (sociological, psychological, or otherwise) of a way of living. *Overvecht between about '64 and '76* offers a way of linking traces of everyday experience to a larger social history. This is partly because Kool's research has yielded several unusual discoveries, documenting points of intersection between domestic life and the wider social and public sphere, such as the audio recording made by a child aged five, featuring a fragment of the children's television show *Ren...je.. rot!*, which makes reference to Le Corbusier as an artistic genius. The interaction between the TV presenter and the child listening (and recording) at home, emphasises the pedagogical role of television in the 1960s and 70s and also suggests that the experience of urban space and modernist architecture may have been shaped not only by the objectives of planners, but also by the high social status of architecture and architects.

### **Artists, Architects and Urban Experience**

At this point it is useful to explore the relationship between contemporary art and architecture more broadly. Artists have perhaps always been interested in architecture but following the inclusion of

presentations by Rem Koolhaas and Aldo van Eyck in Documenta 10 (curated by Catherine David in 1997), architectural practice appears to occupy a more prominent place within art exhibitions. Art exhibitions have also emerged as contexts for new forms of architectural research, such as the project on post-industrial urban development, undertaken by the Berlage Institute at Manifesta 5 (2004), in the Basque region of northern Spain. In addition, it has become relatively conventional for biennial art exhibitions to include architectural or architectonic works that involve the dramatic transformation of familiar exhibition spaces. So visitors to the Venice Biennale in 2001 waited in line for hours to crawl through the German pavilion, transformed by Gregor Schneider into *Totes Haus Ur (Dead House Ur)*, while those attending the 2009 edition could wander around the home of a fictional art collector, inhabited by underdressed male models, in a project conceived by the artists Elmgreen & Dragset for the Nordic and Danish pavilions.

Many artists working with film and photography have been drawn towards the legacy of modernist architecture. Pierre Huyghe's film *This is Not a Time for Dreaming*, 2004 was devised as a response to Le Corbusier's design for the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts at Harvard University and it is informed by research into the architect's time at Harvard. It incorporates a puppet show, the narrative of which offers an oblique, but darkly comical, commentary upon the commissioning experience. Huyghe's earlier work *Streamside Day*, 2003, originally developed as part of an architectural installation at the DIA Art Foundation, was shot in a newly-built suburban housing estate in upstate New York - entitled Streamside. It opens with a carefully composed tableau of young woodland creatures in a forest, which recalls Disney's *Bambi*, even though it involves live action. In subsequent scenes, the camera follows a curious deer as it wanders through a construction site into an unoccupied house, before shifting attention to the human occupants of the estate. As the action unfolds, more residents appear and it becomes apparent that the people of Streamside are preparing for a mysterious event, featuring musical performances and children

dressed in animal costumes, which will mark the founding of their community. It is possible to identify both parallels and differences between this work and the films made at Overvecht.

In my view, Huyghe is not specifically interested in the history, legacy or lived experience of modernist architecture – instead his work tends to be more broadly concerned with the ways in which media images and narratives structure everyday experience, including the ongoing production of memory. *Streamside Day* features a scene in which the residents of the new estate examine a model of the development – emphasising that promotional images and architectural plans play a role in shaping expectations and experiences of domestic and community life. There is a connection here with Kool's film, where the inhabitants seem to adopt the gestures of models, and employ the language of advertising when producing domestic photographs. The latter part of *Streamside Day* then suggests an attempt to intervene in this process, as Huyghe invents a fantastical ritual through which inhabitants of Streamside can articulate, and memorialise, their relationship to each other and their environment now and in the future. In developing this ritual, Huyghe does not attempt to uncover the history of the area, but rather explicitly draws upon images of the natural world that have circulated widely within the realm of popular media. As already noted, elements of fantasy also find their way into ten Westenend's exploration of ritual and cyclicity, through moments of choreography and through the compression of many events into one single day. Significantly, however, the events of this 'perfect day' at Overvecht are largely drawn from the accounts and observations of the various individuals interviewed during the residency process.

### **Historical Precedents**

Before returning to the films of Kool and ten Westenend it seems important to briefly acknowledge a number of artists whose explorations of architecture and urban – or suburban – space preceded the contemporary artworks I have discussed. The practice of Gordon Matta-Clark during the 1970s, involving

dramatic physical interventions such as the slicing of a house in two, documented in photographic collages and film works, may be a significant reference point because it encompassed an exploration of the relationship between architecture, the built environment and property development. By the 1970s many artists working in New York had begun to closely examine the relationship between art practice and real estate. As critics such as Rosalyn Deutsche have demonstrated<sup>1</sup>, artists living in the Lower East Side of the city had been attracted to formerly industrial areas by the availability of large spaces to live and work. Their prominent presence as cultural producers and consumers in these areas eventually contributed to rising property values – with consequences both for artists and for less mobile communities. During the 1980s, the issue of gentrification was addressed through protest, political action and projects such as *If You Lived Here*, 1989. Organised by Martha Rosler at the DIA Art Foundation in lieu of a solo show, this exhibition included contributions from artists, filmmakers, planners, architects along with projects involving homeless people, squatters and activist groups.<sup>2</sup> Arguably, however, the work of the US artist Dan Graham, particularly *Homes for America*, 1966-1967, is equally relevant, particularly to an understanding of Kool's film. Existing first as a slideshow and then a magazine article, *Homes for America* combines text with images of mass-produced homes, drawn from brochures distributed by real-estate agents, commenting both on the widespread use of sociology in artworld discourse at that time and on the prevalence of images of architecture in popular media, specifically magazines such as *Playboy* and *Esquire*.

The British artist Stephen Willats has investigated aspects of urban experience since the 1970s, sometimes focusing on perceptions and experiences of London tower blocks.<sup>3</sup> Like Kool and ten Westenend, Willats has collaborated with practitioners from other disciplines, sometimes employing methods derived from

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<sup>1</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996). See also Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, 'The Fine Art of Gentrification' *October* 31 (1984): 91-111.

<sup>2</sup> Rosler is also known for the use of photomontage in earlier works such as *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful*, 1967-1972, which invite comparison with Renee Kool's reworking of aspirational images of domestic life in *Overvecht between about '64 and '76*.

<sup>3</sup> *State of Agreement*, 2008, a documentary film about Willats research and practice, directed by Charlotte Ginsburg, can be viewed at <http://www.controlmagazine.org/stateofagreement.php>

sociological research. In the *West London Social Resource Project*, 1972, for example, he and his collaborators focused on four neighbourhoods with identifiable social groupings. A booklet with problem-type questions and duplicate pages was distributed to participants, inviting them to describe aspects of their domestic surroundings and their experience of the area through drawings, diagrams and writing. Copies were then displayed publicly in a local library, inviting participants to compare their responses to others, and engage in a process of abstraction – intended to shift focus from the familiar to the conceptual. In this project, as with many others, Willats was interested in the operations and potential of the artwork as a social model and he defined this model as ‘a set of individual representations which have been interconnected to depict in some determined way a more complex structure’.<sup>4</sup> So the artwork is valued for its capacity to both depict complexity and retain a recognisable relation to individual experience. While they may use different strategies, both ten Westenend and Kool clearly share Willats’ fascination with the processes through which meaning can be produced and developed through integration into everyday rituals and routines.

### **Artists as Model Workers and Residents**

If artists have become more sensitised to the dynamics of gentrification since the 1970s, they have also begun to figure more prominently in policies and rhetorics of urban development, often as valued participants in processes of renewal. Advocates of the ‘creative city’ development model, in particular, tend to view artists as valuable residents and workers.<sup>5</sup> The assumption underpinning much of this rhetoric seems to be that a city of highly educated and cultured people will be stable, safe, and wealthy. Artists tend to be highly educated and are also viewed as producers of culture, and so they have the potential to

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Willats, ‘Artwork as Social Model’, *Stephen Willats: Concerning Our Present Way of Living*, London and Eindhoven: Whitechapel Art Gallery and Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1979: 5-8.

<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of Creative City policies in relation to the Netherlands, specifically Amsterdam, see Merijn Oudenampsen, ‘Back to the Future of the Creative City: An Archaeological Approach to Amsterdam’s Creative Redevelopment’, *Variant* 31, Spring 2008, <http://www.variant.org.uk/31texts/31FutureCity.html>

enhance the city's capacity to compete in the knowledge economy, by attracting both other 'knowledge workers' and tourists. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have examined changes in management practices in France since the late 1960s and they claim that managers have gradually incorporated and co-opted an 'artistic critique', defined as 'a desire for liberation, autonomy and authenticity'.<sup>6</sup> Chiapello argues that the origins of the artistic critique lie in the economic inequality that was experienced by many artists, writers and poets in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She emphasises that, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, artists challenged 'society's refusal to grant them the *freedom* to live the only life deemed worthy of living – a life of *authenticity*'.<sup>7</sup> This is a controversial position, and one that has been contested, yet the (historical) alignment of art practice with notions of freedom remains relevant to artists working within the public realm, particularly if their projects involve the participation of non-professionals, such as local residents.

Art historian and theorist Miwon Kwon has highlighted the rise of site-specific and locational modes of production within contemporary art since the 1990s, drawing most of her examples from the US context. She argues that public art often involves the display, even the modelling, of idealised forms of artistic and collective labour. According to Kwon, the artist is sometimes imagined to have a different relationship to his or her labour than other workers.<sup>8</sup> So participation in the production of a site-specific artwork can be encouraged by artists, commissioners or local constituencies precisely because artistic work is imagined to be 'authentic', and viewed as a form of 'unalienated' self-expression. Kwon's critique of site-specific art has been widely debated within art education and practice, and many practitioners are acutely aware of the issues she has raised. This should not mean, however, that artists, public art commissioners or curators avoid working in contexts that might involve collaboration or participation with non-professionals. Instead, it might be necessary to contest (or at least complicate) the fictions of artistic life that underpin

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<sup>6</sup> Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott, London and New York: Verso, 2007, 419.

<sup>7</sup> Eve Chiapello, 'Evolution and Co-optation: The "Artist Critique" of Management and Capitalism', *Third Text* 18.6 (2004), pp. 587. Italics in original.

<sup>8</sup> Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004, 97.

the rhetoric of the 'creative city'.

At this point it is useful to look at an ongoing project, developed in Rotterdam by the artist Jeanne van Heeswijk, which directly addresses the relationship between artists and other workers in the 'creative city'. Van Heeswijk was invited by the local authority to devise a plan for regeneration of a local market where most traders specialised in food, clothing and other goods originate from outside the Netherlands. The market is located near several areas now undergoing regeneration, with residential and work spaces aimed mainly at workers in the knowledge economy. Her approach was to encourage traders to work with volunteers (artists, designers, performers) on the transformation of the market into a cultural destination, by redesigning the stalls, introducing new services and features (many prohibited by local regulations) and by encouraging the development of local enterprise, by using skills exchanges. Typical strategies might involve inviting young artists to play the part of shop assistants, deliberately blurring the boundaries between performance art and the forms of labour that might be associated with 'retail theatre'.

Van Heeswijk's approach has been criticised by some art practitioners because it involves working within, rather than rejecting, the logic of the creative city. It is important to note that in the case of the 'Freehouse' project undertaken at the Afrikaandermarkt in Rotterdam she engages participants in their roles as workers, whether they are artists, market traders, or amateur but talented craftswomen. The focus on the marketplace as the context and setting for these interactions makes explicit some of the forms of exchange and negotiation that are part of contemporary art production, initially suggesting a counterpoint to the display of unalienated artistic labour critiqued by Kwon in some locational projects. But van Heeswijk's own position as a worker in the contemporary art economy, and her identification with the role of artist, remains unclear. Although she is one of the originators of the Freehouse project she has publicly stated that she did not derive an artists' fee for this work, and in general relies upon income from sources

such as speaking engagements to support her practice.<sup>9</sup> By asserting her distance from the art economy in this way van Heeswijk actually seems (perhaps paradoxically) to accept, even endorse, the alignment of artistic labour with notions of autonomy and freedom. Despite these contradictions, van Heeswijk's practice has yielded some new ways of examining the relationship between art practice, location and community. She has coined the term 'location expert' to describe the local participants in her projects, emphasising that these participants are not representatives of the community but rather individuals that possess valuable knowledge and insight. Even though the films *Perfect Day* and *Overvecht between about '64 and '76* can be easily defined as artworks, unlike projects such as Freehouse, the distinction between the 'expert' and the 'representative' seems pertinent to the methodologies developed by Kool and ten Westenend.

It is significant that many of those who interacted with Kool and ten Westenend during their residencies do not actually appear onscreen. *Perfect Day* does feature images of a public performance by the members of a local dance group, and several scenes in which the actions of the landscape maintenance crew have been choreographed. But there are few close-ups of participants and they are not cast as characters whose desires and actions drive the narrative forward. Instead, *Perfect Day* focuses attention on events and actions that have been repeated many times, with particular emphasis on the activity of looking, capturing the residents as they observe and evaluate the work of the tree surgeon. The film is also sensitive to the perspectives of workers and participants who are *off-screen* (such as the camera operators who, like the tree surgeons, may be standing in Cherry Pickers to film from a height). Through this attention to detail, and highly self-conscious cinematography, editing and music, ten Westenend makes visible multiple forms of activity in *Overvecht*, whether manual or conceptual, purposeful or apparently purposeless, paid or voluntary. Kool draws upon the observations of *Overvecht*'s residents, identifying them as a potential

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<sup>9</sup> Jeanne van Heeswijk, 'The Faculty of Being Public', presentation at Graduate School of Creative Arts (GradCAM) in conjunction with the Artizen school organised by Blue Drum, Dublin, October 15, 2010.

source of knowledge about the complex. Her film, however, casts these residents more prominently as the producers and the keepers of knowledge in relation to the popular reception of modernist architecture. In their photographs, the early residents of Overvecht seem to model a new way of living, creating compositions and adopting poses that would not be out of place in advertising or promotional brochures. Many years later, drawn from private archives into Kool's film, these photographs reveal the importance of media representations in shaping the lived experience of domestic and urban space.

### **Conclusion: Beyond The Threshold**

*Perfect Day* and *Overvecht between about '64 and '76* both address the lived experience of Overvecht directly, drawing upon the observations and memories of those who know the place, whether as residents or workers. Like Stephen Willats, Kool and ten Westenend seem to acknowledge the importance of art practice as a 'social model', a means of abstracting experience to enable a movement between the familiar and the conceptual, and a sharing of knowledge across diverse contexts and disciplines. Instead, *Perfect Day* and *Overvecht between about '64 and '76* might be better understood as 'models of thinking'<sup>10</sup>, precisely because they invite viewers and participants to engage with artistic research processes, forms and actions, without pre-categorisation or classification. By responding to the observations, insights and documents generated by residents of Overvecht, Kool and ten Westenend draw attention to the ongoing work of reception – to the rituals and processes through which meaning is continually made. In the sphere of art, as in many other contexts, this work of reception can sometimes be overshadowed by the work of production, just as the insights of those who live in – or maintain - a building are often less valued, culturally and politically, than the insights of architects.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of artworks as 'models of thinking', focusing on the work of Bik van Der Pol, see 'Beyond Institutional Critique: Modest Proposals Made in the Spirit of "Necessity is the Mother of Invention"', Bik Van der Pol, *With Love From The Kitchen* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2005) 25.

<sup>11</sup> The experiences of residents are, however, directly addressed by those engaged in 'Post Occupancy Evaluation', a theme explored by architectural psychologist Riklef Rambow in his contribution to *Afterthoughts*, a day of talks and screenings organised by the artist Dennis McNulty, Green On Red Gallery, Dublin, March 1, 2008. <http://dennismcnulty.com/afterthoughts.html>

Like many of the works I have discussed, *Perfect Day* and *Overvecht between about '64 and '76* signal a move away from traditional forms of 'public art', such as permanently sited sculptures, towards more ephemeral forms of artistic production and reception. The works circulate in the public sphere, and can be viewed in galleries or festivals, in collections or archives. Even as they recede into the past, acquiring the status of documents, these films will continue to assert an orientation towards the future – suggesting models of thinking that are open to being on the threshold, somewhere between uncertainty and possibility.