

THE MEASUREMENT OF PRESENCE

Artists: Remy Jungerman and Iris Kensmil
Curator: Benno Tempel

The concept for *The Measurement of Presence*, the exhibition for the Dutch Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale in 2019, was prompted by a reflection on the history of the biennale, the location, discussions with the artists, and the current discourse. These elements together provide the context for the exhibition.

The Venice Biennale was first held in 1895. I Giardini, the site of the country pavilions, many of which are now listed buildings, largely reflects the geopolitical relations of the 20th century. But it also underwent a transformation in the 20th century. Originally, the pavilions were intended as national showcases, based on 19th-century notions of nationalism. During the 20th century this view made way for an unconditional faith in the universal values of modernism. Neither of these dogmas brooked any dissension. Nowadays, it is clear that both these views have had their day. Permanent flows of people and artefacts of today break boundaries and produce new identities outside and separate from nation states. Places and societies are becoming ever more interconnected in our globalised world. But, on the whole, globalisation also causes alignment, and imposes prevailing principles. As a result, we risk losing the specific. Change is needed, but how is not always clear.

The Measurement of Presence will be a post-national presentation that reassesses and debunks these notions and mechanisms. We will show the power of letting go, of setting in motion. Artists Remy Jungerman and Iris Kensmil, who will present their work in *The Measurement of Presence*, have developed an alternative approach to the things that connect us. They do not seek to preserve the status quo. Instead, they embrace motion. They explore traditions and the past, bringing them into contact with the present. Their transnational attitude brings together influences from different backgrounds. In their work they combine the inspiration they draw from 20th-century modernism and the avant-garde – particularly Mondrian and De Stijl, and Stanley Brouwn – with elements of other traditions and positions. In so doing, they size up the world, registering and defining their own presence relative to others and the world. This would seem not only to be a useful attitude for artists, but also a way that new models for society might emerge.

Remy Jungerman (b. 1959) and Iris Kensmil (b. 1970) each left the place where they spent their youth to continue their artistic development in the Netherlands. They made – and continue to make – an autonomous choice for change. They do not proceed from any specifically Surinamese or Dutch way of thinking. On the contrary, their views enrich and are shining examples of our transnational culture.

EXHIBITION

Presence is needed to make change possible. This exhibition will force us to reassess our distance from artists, from history and from other people. Jungerman and Kensmil will measure the potential for change, not as scientists but as artists. They will explore how the presence and visibility of spirit and history are needed for existence.

Jungerman and Kensmil will produce new work for Venice.

REMY JUNGERMAN

In 2018 Jungerman is living in New York, a city with a double meaning for him. It is the city where Piet Mondrian found refuge in 1940, yet at the same time it is the place where the Dutch did a deal with the British over Suriname in 1674. New Amsterdam became New York and Suriname became a Dutch colony. Living in this city in preparation for the Biennale gives him the perfect setting in which to think about the subject of measurement.

The wind can send us in different directions. It can spontaneously blow things, thoughts and spirits in our direction. Remy Jungerman uses these winds that come from different directions in his work, combining motifs from Africa, from the Maroon culture and from 20th-century modernism. Jungerman is interested in the path travelled by patterns, drawings and shapes. Since he brings together these winds from different directions and times, condensation of time plays an important role in his

installations. The motifs meld to form a new dimension and reality. The coming together of such diverse sources as Winti and Gerrit Rietveld determines the format and rhythm of his installations. The human presence will be highly tangible in Jungerman's work for Venice, *Visiting Deities*. Jungerman will measure our spiritual space. The installation will allow room for the spirits to participate. The installation will go beyond criticism or accusations over lost ancestors. Instead, Jungerman will exhort the forefathers of the Dutch world – our ancestors from the Netherlands, Suriname, Indonesia and elsewhere – to get behind us with their positive energy to help us face our common future. *Visiting Deities* will emphasise the links and similarities between cultural identities, and encourage open conversation (*Visiting Deities* is named after the short film Bonno Thoden van Velzen made in the interior of Suriname in 1962). Another of Jungerman's works – his monumental *Promise* – will welcome visitors as they enter the pavilion. This work consists of a large cube containing long wooden slats. In terms of its size it refers to the work of Stanley Brouwn, while at the same time incorporating elements of the Winti rituals of the Maroons of Suriname. *Promise* is a gift from the gods, painted in the colours of ritual textiles.

IRIS KENSMIL

Kensmil finds the issues she explores in her work as she goes in search of history. She describes her work as painting memories, by which she means that she is giving a stature to until recently neglected history of people of colour. She introduces us to Black female authors, philosophers, activists and musicians. By adding ideas from the past to our current views, she expands our consciousness, which can lead to change. Kensmil's work not only reflects on history, it also gives a new dimension to the present. She ensures the presence of the past, and also of Black culture and its thinkers. Black culture is an integral part of Western society and inextricably linked with it. Its impact is increasingly being placed in a broader perspective, but it needs to be made more visible, particularly when it comes to the role of women.

Kensmil's installation for Venice, *Here the New Utopia Begins*, will specifically explore utopianism and the stance of women of colour. The work will evoke the modernist utopianism inspired by the work of Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich, whom she regards as the iconographers of that utopianism. At the same time, she sees the utopianism of that era as a one-sided ideal. The work will correct that one-sidedness by presenting another vision of utopianism espoused by Black female intellectuals, women who, in their writing and their actions, expressed their desire to create a better world. In collaboration with The Black Archives, Kensmil is researching Black female utopians, focusing mainly – in view of her own background – on the Caribbean, America and Europe. Kensmil's work will invite us to take the responses of Black feminists and use them to adjust our view of modernist utopianism.

Kensmil sets out to raise the issue of the visibility of neglected Black feminists, and thus how they manifest themselves, but will combine this in another artwork with the question of the visibility and absence of the artist, in reference to Stanley Brouwn, among others. The strategy an artist adopts in dealing with the reception and framing of his work is a prominent feature of the current discourse, in striking analogy with other groups such as Black feminists.

What connects Jungerman and Kensmil is their quest for an all-encompassing history, of a location, of a pattern, of a personal story. And this is precisely where the key lies, a key to new ways of living together, in which transnationality can serve as an example. Jungerman and Kensmil incorporate these ideas but also take them further in their work, each in their own way. They nimbly circumvent the unique position of the individual in a world with shifting boundaries and views. The personal and the general come together in their work, which presents a vision of art, history and art history, and our existence in this world.

Jungerman and Kensmil's work for Venice will be connected in terms of the monumental nature of the installations, the influence of modernism and the multiplicity of interpretations. Their shared Surinamese background will also ensure a particular sensitivity. The pride that their work exudes makes a powerful argument for equality. Growth, once begun in disadvantaged circumstances (for the Maroons, and for women) can now be displayed with pride.

RIETVELD PAVILION

The Rietveld Pavilion is light and open. At first, this obscures the importance of dimensions in this architecture. Rietveld used a 4-metre module to build a pavilion measuring 16m x 16m that functions

as an open space (the glass of the windows accounts for a quarter of the width and three-quarters of the height of the pavilion).

These features of the building – open space, light, modular dimensions – have been adopted in the plan for the installation of the exhibition. We believe that these elements, which were important in the modernist era, will emphasise the continuity between the artists selected and Rietveld's intentions. He wished to create a space where people could meet, like a public square. The scale that makes his buildings so pleasant to walk round in is an element of Rietveld's designs that is often forgotten. The works by Jungerman and Kensmil will emphasise this human element of coming together, sharing and experiencing. Thanks to the monumental size of their work, dimension will be an important element of this exhibition. At the same time, these large works will enhance the spatiality of the Rietveld Pavilion, in a tribute to this modernist building.

CATALOGUE

A catalogue will be published to accompany the exhibition. In the publication, various international authors will set out their views on the implications of transnationalism for artistic practice. They will write about the diaspora and how patterns travel, the knowledge gap, the meaning of the invisible, the role of ritual in contemporary art and globalisation versus the individual. There will be a particular focus on the significance of strategies that artists use to position themselves in this context. The publication will give readers the opportunity to explore a world of ideas and discover new approaches to the debates that dominate today's society.

The catalogue will be produced and published by Hannibal Publishers / Hatje Cantz Verlag, in collaboration with the Mondrian Fund.

PROGRAMME OF EVENTS

The impact of the Biennale will extend to more than just the exhibition in the Dutch pavilion. This will however be the pivot, and the event that sets things in motion both prior to and after the Biennale. We should like to organise a number of debates in 2019 to launch the concept of the exhibition and highlight the issue of transnationalism. Some will be staged outside the Netherlands.

THE NETHERLANDS

We intend to debate the issues mentioned above in the concept for the exhibition and catalogue in collaboration with a number of organisations.

The Black Archives (<http://www.theblackarchives.nl>) have already committed to participate. This organisation administers several collections, archives and libraries associated with the work and legacy of black writers and scholars. The library houses some 3000 works on subjects like racism, race issues, colonisation and decolonisation, gender and feminism.

UNITED KINGDOM

We plan to organise debates in London, in collaboration with Paul Goodwin of TrAIN (The University of the Arts London Research Centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation, a forum for historical, theoretical and practice-based research in architecture, art, communication, craft and design).

TrAIN is known for raising issues like the growing complexity of our globalised world. In society today, established certainties about the nature of culture, tradition and authenticity are constantly being questioned. It is no longer easy to define the nature of the local and the international, and many cultural interactions now operate on the level of the transnational.

Central to TrAIN's activities is a consideration of the impact of identity and nation on the production and consumption of artworks and artefacts in this new global context.

Paul Goodwin is an independent curator, lecturer and urban theorist based in London. His curatorial and research interests span the fields of art and migration, urbanism and critical curation. As a curator at Tate Britain from 2008-2012 he directed Tate Britain's pioneering Cross Cultural Programme, a multi-disciplinary platform exploring the impact of globalisation on contemporary art in Britain. He has curated and co-curated a number of internationally significant exhibitions.

FUTURE LOCATIONS

We hope to show *The Measurement of Presence* at a number of other locations after Venice, from late 2019 to late 2020. We are currently in talks with a number of institutions regarding the possibilities. We plan to bring the exhibition to the Netherlands (GEM museum of contemporary art, The Hague) and to the United States (New York, Queens Museum or Brooklyn Museum).

APPENDIX

Stanley Brouwn

The original idea for the Dutch pavilion included work by artist Stanley Brouwn (1935-2017). Though we have now decided against this, his work continues to inspire the artists involved.

For Jungerman, who will use units of measurement in the various installations he will show in Venice, Brouwn's role is mainly a reflective one. How did he as an artist manage in a largely white environment, and to what extent was his vanishing act from the 1970s onwards influenced by the arrival of a large group of Surinamese in the Netherlands prior to independence in the colony?

To Kensmil, Brouwn is more of a reference point whom she admires for his attitude as an artist. The way in which he determined his own strategies has been a great inspiration to her. His work embodies 'the confidence that everyone can define his own position in the world'. In the exhibition Kensmil will reflect on the visibility and absence of the artist, referring to Stanley Brouwn, among others. By combining absence and visibility, the work will also connect with the portraits of neglected Black feminists that will also feature in the installation.

As was the case in the original plan, Brouwn will still feature in the publication accompanying the exhibition and in the programme of debates we plan to organise, as an artist with a particular attitude, and in terms of the shifts in the interpretation of his work. Subjects like dimensions, self-positioning, and interpretation of the work and strategy of the artist are prominent in the current discourse.

It is important to review Brouwn's work and strategy in light of such contemporary debates, both for his legacy and the public curation of his work, and for today's artists.