COFFEEPASTE

Interview: Willem de Rooij

‘Hut Hut’ emerged from your residency at Maumaus. How did the experience of working in Lisbon shape the direction of the research, and what drew you specifically to shepherds' shelters as a subject?

When Maumaus invited me to develop an exhibition for Lumiar Cité, I was asked to research potential approaches on site. As I am interested in transcultural histories, relations and global connections, I asked Maumaus to suggest possible leads in the city. They then organised an itinerary for Maumaus’s exhibition manager Filipe Alves and me to explore the city together, investigating various holdings relating to intercultural histories.

Ultimately, the location that interested me most was the National Museum of Ethnology, which features semi-public storage facilities. Open storage is a phenomenon that became prominent around the turn of the millennium within the framework of contemporary art – an early example being Schaulager in Basel. Lisbon’s National Museum of Ethnology already had open storage facilities installed in the 1970s, which they gradually opened to the public in the 1990s.

Since I am interested in museology, I’m fascinated by how an institution tackles these challenges: how to create a storage system that is both functional and accessible? The particular holdings also interested me: one storage section is dedicated to Amazonian objects, the other organised around objects collected in Portugal. I found the contrast between objects from far and near interesting in the context of this museum, and I wondered about the effect on the visitor experience and the mechanics of the ethnographic gaze.

Among the collection of Portuguese rural artefacts and tools, you were particularly interested in shepherds’ shelters.

The shepherd’s shelter spoke to me because I understood the urban development of Lumiar Cité and the building of the exhibition space as places that connect to a broader notion of sheltering.

The two early works in the exhibition, *Rijksmuseum/Tropenmuseum* and *Hut*, date from 1993, over thirty years ago. What does it mean to show them alongside a new commission? Do you see continuity or rupture between those concerns and your current practice?

Yes, I see a lot of continuities, and that's exactly why I exhibit them. Showing these early works enabled me to gain a better understanding of the new site-specific installation. At the same time, I was able to re-engage with these earlier works and deepen my understanding of them.

I made these works when I was a student in the 1990s. At the time, they felt really important to me, but I found it difficult to understand exactly why. Over the last thirty years, I've exhibited them occasionally, and each time I felt as if I took a small step towards understanding them better.
But to be honest, it was only when I showed them in the context of the exhibition in Lisbon that I really grasped what these objects encompass. It's a very special feeling, and it took me three decades to reach this point. I'm so grateful to have learned that this is possible in an artist's life!

To what kind understanding you came by presenting these works in Lisbon?

When I made these works in Amsterdam, I scanned the institutional landscape there in a schematic way. I decided to focus on two institutions: on the one hand the Rijksmuseum, which has a nationalistic mission in that it exclusively collects historical art from The Netherlands. On the other hand, I focused on the so-called World Museum (then the Tropenmuseum) which collects ethnographic artefacts from the Global South. Having been founded at the height of The Netherlands' colonial era, this institution too is based on nationalistic and colonial ideologies. Both museums seemed quite obscure to me at the time. Unlike the National Museum of Ethnology in Lisbon, we are not given the opportunity to look deeper into the inner workings of these museums by visiting their storage facilities, so there is an impenetrable darkness to them. This is why I blacked out the structures with dark paint in the first pair of postcards displayed in the entrance area of Lumiar Cité. This emphasises the outlines of both museums' buildings, highlighting their structural and ideological similarities.

The second early work on display is also based on postcards. Here I zoomed in on the inside of the Tropenmuseum, where a folly of an ethnographic object was exhibited in 1990s. The object looks like an Indonesian hut, but it is actually a copy built by the Tropenmuseum. One postcard shows this hut surrounded by ethnographic objects within the museum's architecture. On the second, identical postcard I blacked out the surroundings of the hut so that only the object is visible.

These earlier works achieve on a micro level what my new installation does on another: they raise questions about the nature of these collections and their ideological entanglements. What happens to objects that travel outside the context in which they were produced? What happens to their meaning, their significance and power?

The concept of the ‘digital loan’ is central to the new installation. What does it reveal, or conceal, about the relationship between an object and the institution that holds it?

It displays the kind of digital security technology that contemporary museums use. Security has always been a key element in the relationship between museology, appropriation, ethnography, modernity and colonialism. Security would not be necessary if these objects were not associated with violence and theft. Museums have been supporting white supremacy through the production of difference. The complexities of museological and loan politics, as well as storage infrastructures, evolve out of these contested, asymmetrical and violent histories.

You chose to use security cameras through which to live stream the shelters. The press release notes the tension between surveillance and protection, both functions that these vernacular structures once performed. Was that tension a starting point, or something you discovered along the way?

It evolved because, initially, we proposed to loan the shepherds’ huts and exhibit them in the Lumiar Cité space. However, due to the fragility of the objects, and because of their value, they were not allowed to travel. I’ve been thinking about digital loans for a long time, and now is the first time I have actually used them, together with Lumiar Cité. It is exciting for me to experience how the security that these huts are thought to produce, the technology that channels these loans and the installation itself all merge together.

The installation connects three very different spaces: a museum in Lisbon, a museum in rural Spain and a gallery in Alta de Lisboa. How do you think about the urban context of Lumiar Cité? As an active element in the work, rather than a neutral container?

The idea to select a hut from the museum in Lisbon emerged from my thoughts about the specific space of Lumiar Cité. When I visited the venue for the first time I had many questions. Why is it necessary for an art space to exist in this newly constructed suburb? What should its function be?

Due to the impressive glass façade of Lumiar Cité there is full visibility in both directions, with people looking in from the outside and looking out from the inside. I experience Lumiar Cité as a kind of voyeuristic machine. This raises questions around visibility, culture, shelter and class. Since the exhibition space is located in a residential area, it literally looks out at contemporary shelters – people’s homes. It is impossible to ignore these when creating an exhibition in this space; as a viewer standing inside, 50% of what you see and experience are these outside shelters. For me, they are more than just a backdrop; they are part of the work.

Your practice has long engaged with the politics of ethnographic collections and the ideological underpinnings of museums. How do you navigate the risk of reproducing, rather than questioning, the colonial gaze?

I believe that coloniality, the colonial world and colonial reality are part of everyone's life everywhere, as they have been for a long time. That's why I think this topic can't be addressed in a simple binary – it feels reductive to me to reduce such sprawling questions into either 'reproducing' or 'questioning'. I don't think this is an effective way to approach such complex topics.

In the context of this particular installation, I have been reflecting on the distinction between the ethnography of cultures that are distant and those that are nearby. I encountered these two types of storage at the museum in Lisbon: the collections of objects from the Amazons, and rural Portuguese objects. I tried to understand these two different ethnographic gazes, what happens when one 'others' the neighbors, so to speak. I found this fascinating in relation to the surroundings of Lumiar Cité, because the space offers a 24/7 view of those who live next door. That's what happens in the Ethnographic Museum too. The Ethnographic Museum has been looking at its neighbours outside Lisbon.

Through this open storage of Portuguese material, the neighbours have also somehow been 'othered', in the sense that only material culture objects from rural communities was accumulated. The responsible academics and curators did not collect their own typewriters or other items that played a role in their own immediate surroundings. So, just because the ethnographic gaze was directed onto nearby subjects, doesn't mean that othering didn't happen in the process – in this case along class and urban/rural lines. These are all interesting aspects to consider, and they make the intersections of colonial thinking, possible political action and other views on these kinds of projects more complex for me. Colonial impulses continue to occur in many ways in all our lives, not just in ethnographic museums.

Teaching at the Städelschule and the Rijksakademie, and co-founding BPA// Berlin, places you in an ongoing conversation with younger generations of artists. How does that context feed back into your own work?

Well, I'm a Gemini, so I like anything to do with pairs. I love what happens when two entities meet and something new emerges in between them. When I was a student, I started working with my colleague Jeroen de Rijke, from the moment we met on the first day of art school. From that moment on, we were inseparable, both as friends and as working partners. So, I graduated from school as a collaborator – I had never learned to work alone.

Jeroen and I made short films on 16 mm and 35 mm, through which the notion of editing and montage became important to me. I enjoyed bringing together elements, as you do in film montage, and then seeing what could happen through the combination or interplay of these elements. This became a key

method for me. Jeroen de Rijke passed away in 2006, and I don't make films anymore today. However, the potential of editing is still important to me when creating temporary installations, in which I bring existing objects together and allow something to happen in between them. That is where I locate the generative energy of my installations. And while I can't collaborate with Jeroen anymore, I do collaborate with other people. So, in both my working methods and my relational activities I am never alone. The notion of two or multiple in the combination of different factors and elements, people and energies, feeds my thinking and my work.

I'm a very curious person and I love learning. That's why I love being in school. I started teaching when I was a student myself, doing community outreach in Amsterdam. To me, a school is much more a place of learning than a place of teaching. For me, teaching happens through exchange. I'm not good at what the Germans call *Frontalunterricht* – frontal teaching. I prefer all parties in a classroom to be in conversation at eye level, and hopefully something will evolve from that, so that all parties can learn.

For me teaching and learning go hand in hand, and I've always been fortunate to work in environments like that. I learned most in places such as De Ateliers, where I mentored for twelve years, or at the Rijksakademie, where I was a participant in the late 1990s. I also learned a great deal at Art Center in Los Angeles, where I was a guest tutor in the 2010s. Artists such as Stephen Prina, Christopher Williams and Morgan Fisher took me along on their studio visits with emerging artists. I learned everything I know about teaching from them.

The Berlin Program for Artists (BPA), which I co-founded in Berlin, is based on those experiences. It is structured around horizontal exchange. Meetings are organised in the studios of emerging artists, who are invited to engage with our programme for two years. We introduce them to more experienced artists, thinkers, curators and writers living in Berlin. Mentors and participants all visit each other's studios, which makes for more horizontal forms of exchange.

Because I was so young when I started teaching, my first mentees or conversation partners were almost my age. I have met a lot of people since then, and the relationships that form often last beyond the institutional frame within which they begin. This group of people from different generations continues to grow. I see this as a huge privilege and I am always touched that people trust me to visit their studios.

That's all I can say. For me, making, learning and teaching are inextricably linked and I've always been excited to meet artists and educators for whom that works in the same way. These are the artists that I feel most connected to.

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