

Monday 24 January 2011, location: De Balie, Amsterdam.

[DR] Interview with [ES] subject is the happening; “*A life changing experience*”, performed on Saturday 22 January 2011 between 3 and 3.30pm at the entrance of *de Appel arts centre*, Ferdinand Bolstraat, Amsterdam.

[DR] Why and when did you start to organize the happening; “*A life changing experience*”?

[ES] ‘It all started with a meeting with guest tutors at the *Sandberg Institute* in September 2010. Four tutors presented themselves and after their presentations we were free to tell our preferences. I chose to have meetings with Loek Grootjans, because he seemed to me a very diverse and besides a quite philosophical artist. Loek was going to talk with us about art in public space. The second tutor I chose was Alicia Framis, on one hand I think we are opposites but on the other we have also a lot in common. That tension attracted me, also the drive Alicia has is very inspiring. Her meetings would be about how to represent your work for example in a magazine, and what or how to write about it. In the same time we would try to develop a work for the public space.

After a while Alicia came up with the idea to create work which was inspired by or reacting on the attic of *de Appel arts centre*. An illegal space inside the museum, because it was not really allowed to show work there. I remembered when hearing this news it made me very angry. Because *de Appel* is already a sculpture and since the summer situation; “*The hanging gardens of Babylon*”, I feel very seduced by the public space.’

[DR] Why do you feel so seduced by public space?

[ES] ‘Because it is not safe, it is not fixed. The people you meet there are often not the typical museum visitors. The people are not used to perceive art. So the reactions you get are very pure and direct. Besides there are all ambiguous aspects like the weather, but also other geophilosophical elements play a huge role by the realisation and continuation of a situation in public space.’

[DR] To go back to the circumstances Alicia proposed, how did you continue?

[ES] ‘I took some time to adjust, I was sure about the fact that I am not going to create an object and bring it to *de Appel*. I want to create connections, situations, not silently illegal but very public and known by everyone! I want to connect a certain space with an experienced time angle; people are not only viewers or consumers of the work, they are the work because they participate in it. When I saw in the end of November our state secretary of culture Halbe Zijlstra, talking about their new policy for subsidizing art institutes by the number of visitors the museum attracts, for me the idea became clearer. In the same time there was critique in the press on an institute as *de Appel* because the institute isn’t attracting that much visitors, and the critique was based on the idea that *de Appel* is only visited by some ‘insiders’. All these elements show that there was an urge to organize a queue of people in front of the museum without any external reason.’

[DR] You wanted to make a statement against these political ideas as a protest?

[ES] ‘No I wanted to generate a connection with several opinions; I wanted to show that it is not difficult to bring only simple solutions, but that it is much more difficult to bring simple

solutions which really higher the level in general. I wanted to create a work which connected the opposites without judging. Everyday a lot of people leave the public transport at the Ferdinand Bolstraat in front of the entrance of *de Appel*. A lot of these people are going to the supermarket on the other side of the street; they don't go to *de Appel*. But everybody can identify himself with a queue of waiting people. So the queue immediately communicates, connects. I wanted to connect the inside with the outside, the institute with the public space. The queue is making the complexity visible rather than to be only a statement against the contemporary political ideas. Experience is the source of all knowledge, by experiencing the complexity and by undergoing it; we might come to more clear ideas for the future.'

[DR] If the queue was not meant to be only as a protest against the government, can you tell us short a little bit more specific about the other elements of the queue?

[ES] 'The queue was questioning the connection of art and daily life. What is the role of art and the artist? Is art only hanging or standing peacefully in a white cube or is it active and moving and appearing in between the people in public space. Is the work asking the viewer to participate or is it possible to walk away after two seconds perceiving a work. What could be the political impact? The queue was also questioning the museum, how flexible are they to react on necessity, and how contemporary is the art they show? Or are they a morgue for recently died arts? It is my opinion that the art shown in *de Appel* often misses an actual necessity, an inescapable urge or vision. My ideas for a contemporary art museum are much more dynamic than what I see around me now. In the same time the role of the artist should be questioned, he or she is not somebody who installs a work of art and goes home waiting to collect the work again in the end. No the artist plays an active role during the whole process.'

[DR] This makes me think about the title: "*A life changing experience*", this sounds quite promising why did you choose this title?

[ES] 'It was somewhere in November that I watched the talk show *Pauw & Witteman* on the Dutch television late at night, their guest was a spokesman from the KLM airline. He announced that KLM is going to offer space trips for 'normal people'. Starting in 2014 the airline will offer this unique '*life changing experience*' for a price of 70,000 euros. Later on in the show he explained that by developing these possibilities in the future they can offer a 3 hour flight to Australia. That will not only change our perspective of time, but will also generate new economical possibilities for the company.

It made me realize that we create most development because it is giving economical benefits or economical benefits on the long term. I was wondering how we develop all experiences which do not generate any direct economical profit. The queue is there because of ideological reasons. What about social development in times where social economical differences create the biggest form of discrimination?

The title is very much connected with commercialism and advertisements. It reacts directly on the idea that a museum has to attract more people to make sure it will get funding to keep the door from the institute open. The title also refers to big entertainment parks as the Efteling, where every year a new attraction is opened to feed the hunger for new pleasure; "*life changing experiences*", a reason to come and visit. To entertain yourself. But what if this; "*life changing experience*" is confronting you for example with your own death? What does a model; counting people as tool to indicate importance, mean for a museum and the art they're able to show under the pressure to generate a countable importance?'

[DR] Do you experience yourself the happening as; “A *life changing experience*”?

[ES] ‘Yes in fact I do. This summer I wanted to organize a silent walk with a large group of people through the woods towards the situation; “*The hanging gardens of Babylon*”. After a lot of e-mails, phoning and visiting people, there were two people ready to join me. That was disappointing. But the idea itself I could not get it out of my head. When I was telling people about the flash mob, the queue, they often said to me that in these days of individualism it is impossible to generate, as a one man organizer, a large amount of people in front of the pay-desk. But after giving the best of myself it was for me *a life changing experience*, to see that so many people took the effort to come and join. There were even people who had to travel three hours to come and three hours to go back home.’

[DR] Were there also people missing who said they would come?

[ES] ‘I think this is not a very interesting question. It was funny that after the happening I received e-mails from people with their agenda explaining why they were unable to come.’

[DR] You write on your website that you did presentations on art academies how were the reactions by the students on your question to participate?

[ES] ‘Quite diverse and nice, we talked on several aspects about the work. The question: “is it art?” was the number one question. Does it have to be clear was my thought, but some said it is a protest, others said; “No the happening is art!” This tension and uncertainty how to approach the work made it very interesting to discuss. There were even people in the queue which did not realize to be also part of somebody’s happening as a work, they were convinced to be part of a protest. Another question was; “why should I help you because you can put *de Appel* on your C.V.?” In the art world there is this big importance to create ‘a name’, branding, and to help a fellow artist realizing a work at a respected institute gives ground for a question like this.’

[DR] You contacted a lot of art institutes and museums, how did they respond on your request?

[ES] ‘In the beginning some were suspicious and said to me that *De Appel* should take care of its own publicity. *de Appel* itself was quite slow in the beginning to make publicity, or to put it on their website. After the action got attention in *NRC handelsblad* and for example on the websites from *Kunstbeeld* and *Metropolism* it helped. Overall people from museums and art initiatives were very willing to help. Some museums were not able to use there mail lists because they use them only for there own shows. But sometimes the result was that employers from a museum who were repressed by these rules were forwarding the e-mail to each other. I also asked galleries to help me spread the news; from them I almost did not receive any reply.’

[DR] How do you explain this lack of interest especially at the commercial side of the art world?

[ES] ‘I have no idea, its disappointing because museum shows give credit to the artists they represent. Maybe my name was at this moment not yet big enough to respond.’

But in the same time I invited the state secretary for culture, Halbe Zijlstra and he did not react at all.'

[DR] How *de Appel* reacted on your proposal from the beginning?

[ES] 'After I received an e-mail from Ann Demeester that she was in principal not against the idea, that was the beginning of December, it was difficult to get in touch to talk about the idea. She pointed out to look up the work of Roman Ondák, he created the queue with the title; *Good Feelings in Good Times* (2003). We had an appointment 15 December where Ann Demeester did not show up. That was disappointing. It seemed that with Christmas ahead I could not count on any response before the New Year. I decided that it took too long and although I wanted *de Appel* to support me, I announced the happening on internet before I could talk about approval.'

[DR] Why that was so important for you?

[ES] 'Because I wanted to take the suggestion away of a 'wild protest', it was a happening not a protest.'

[DR] Did you manage to speak to Ann Demeester in the New Year?

[ES] 'Yes, the fifth of January we had a very nice talk. And I felt supported. She offered that people could enter the museum for free, which was not necessary in my opinion because it was all about the queue and not about visiting the museum. But from her point of view I could understand the offer. She also wanted the documentation from the happening for the archive of *de Appel*.'

[DR] When you look back on the work what was most difficult in realizing the happening?

[ES] 'I think the most difficult was being categorized as student because I participate in the MFA program of the *Sandberg Institute*. On one side the interest of the *Sandberg Institute* and me being part of a group students, on the other side the interest of *de Appel*. I feel hundred percent situationist, when it comes to making a work there is no other voice in my head. It is a sick radical process in which I ask everything from myself. So I wanted to be taken seriously as a professional. But institutes have other interests, I remember a four days mail conversation about a text for *de Appel* website where it should be clear that I am a student part of Alicia Framis her workshop. I think it has everything to do with protecting the reputation of *de Appel* when cooperating with an unknown artist like me. But in the same time *Sandberg Institute* would like to be involved as name because of their interests.

I remember that I wrote to Loek Grootjans who was all the time a big support for me, "it feels like after a long wandering I slowly reach a top of a mountain and I know that there is no way back other than to fly down. But at the moment I have the self-confidence to jump from the cliff, to really fly; it looks like elastic hands try to grab my wings, they try to lift on the same energy as me...."

[DR] So it felt as a heavy weight?

[ES] 'It's better to say that it was unpredictable and sometimes bothering the radical process, we had to search ways to find each other. But for me as well as for the *Sandberg Institute* and *de Appel* I think it was quite a new experience. Everybody in its own way had some trouble to give it the right form and value.

Its all about certain frames and categorizations. Personally I think when you are doing a master education you should forget the word student and act like a professional. First of all I believe that you're born an artist and you can not learn to be one. Second of all the word student paralyses and most of the time it makes the person even lazy because as a student you should still learn a lot and you can sit back and wait to get the right input from the institute. Let artists act and interact within a master education as professionals and give them the right tools when they need it, which is what a master education in arts should be about in my opinion.'

[DR] What is your overall feeling after; "*A life changing experience*"?

[ES] 'It is a positive one! We realized the connection between inside and outside, that was my main goal. It's funny that people ask me now, how many people participated in the queue to give a certain value on the impact. I answer them that it is the same question as Halbe Zijlstra is asking the museums, counting heads to define importance....'

More information on the happening: "*A life changing experience*" here:

<http://www.edwinstolk.nl/alifechangingexperience.htm>