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THE ONGOING MOMENT.
REFLECTIONS ON IMAGE AND SOCIETY

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THE ONGOING MOMENT*. REFLECTIONS ON IMAGE AND SOCIETY

1.

I wish to dedicate this talk to the memory of Patricia De Martelaere, author and philosopher (1957-2009).

"If you pay careful attention to your environment," she wrote in her essay *Over zoeken en vinden* (*On Seeking and Finding*), "you will see that philosophy is in fact present everywhere". And somewhat further, she added: "Shall we, then, define 'art' as an enigmatic way of *not* formulating questions that cannot be formulated, and of leaving them forever open in a fascinating form?".

It is with these questions on proper perception, on the world and on art that I wish to begin. I am neither a philosopher nor an artist. A dramaturge is always a wavering being that, depending on the artistic process in which s/he intervenes, always has to keep filling him-/herself with other materials. This is, of course, only possible if you have your own materials, too. Today I have been asked to draw on these "own materials": to tell a personal story, then. I wish to talk about the world that is our home today and how we perceive it, the metaphors we use in doing so, the images we search for to describe this world in the hope of understanding it a little bit better.

2.

We all construct sign systems in our lives, networks of reference points: thoughts, visions, metaphors which each of us uses to help read the world, society, history. As one grows older, one's identity and sign system increasingly tend to coincide. One's personality is largely defined by the metaphors one has acquired over a lifetime. But the world is constantly changing and at a certain point, that individual sign system no longer seems to correspond to what one sees around oneself. One keeps on reading and reading; and one keeps on translating and translating; but it becomes increasingly clear that one is using the wrong dictionary.

"The cultural alienation of the aging man or woman is to be interpreted as the difficulty of finding one's way in an unknown order of signs, under brand new signals," Jean Améry wrote in his perceptive 1968 book, *On Aging: Revolt and Resignation*. He would commit suicide ten years later, the result of his profound dissatis-

*The title of this talk was borrowed from the name of Geoff Dyer's book about photography.

faction with life as such and a losing battle with his own life, in which he was unable to deal with the torture and wounds he suffered during his internment in the Second World War. If one tries to accept the sign system of a new reality, a different structuring of the world, so Améry claimed, the price to pay will be the destruction of that highly intimate and individual reading system that one has built up over decades. One could thus describe the will to survive as the permanent alertness to the decyphering of what is new in the world, the headstrong effort needed to continue evaluating and discarding what is old: to erase signs that are no longer of any use, and replace them with others. Regardless of its necessity, it remains a painful process, because one will have grown fond of those old metaphors, and they will simply have become a part of oneself. To rid oneself of them, one has to tear them out of one's own flesh. And there are some that, though one knows better, one will still wish to hold on to, since, though awkward and of little use, they remain beautiful and valuable.
But whoever wishes to live a conscious life, to live on, to survive, cannot avoid that painful process.

3.
In general, this process will not unfold smoothly, but proceeds by shocks. The most significant turning points always seem to me to be those at which social upheavals occur of such magnitude, that the individual sign system is shocked into realising how unsuitable it is. And as with important paradigm shifts in science, the "new system" will be discovered, translated, experienced as a readable text and transformed into a language by those who can see with new eyes: in other words, especially by the younger generations or those who, because of different life experiences, have not fully integrated the old system. Put differently, still: by those who have not interiorised the old system.

4.
I graduated and entered the world, as they say, in 1968. In Paris, students were demonstrating with the labour movement. Factories were on strike. Anti-capitalist demands were up for discussion. Russian tanks entered the capital of what was then Czechoslovakia and nipped the Prague Spring in the bud, smothering its longing for more democracy. Liberation movements in South America were

fighting next to small farmers for land reform (Bolivia, Chile, Nicaragua). In Vietnam, a small but dogged people challenged the US military superpower, and won. In the US itself, the Civil Rights Movement demanded civil rights for the black population. In the early seventies, the death of Franco in Spain and the Carnation Revolution in Portugal did away with two dictatorships in the south of Europe. And this upheaval in Portugal immediately brought about independence for the last remaining colonies in Africa (Angola and Mozambique). In Greece, the colonels' short-lived rule was brought to an end, while in Chile, Allende's Unidad Popular was crushed by Pinochet's military coup. Etc.

5.
There were victories and defeats, but the prevailing feeling was that the world was moving on all fronts. It was a time – for me, for us – of discoveries and enthusiasm. We believed in the possibility of changing the world, and that, if we joined forces and stood together, we could create a different world: more just; free of poverty, discrimination and authoritarianism; and in which all people would be equal and independent. No matter where one found oneself in society, it was possible to contribute something, to become involved. Lawyers fought class justice. Teachers stood up for anti-authoritarian education. Feminist movements, soldiers' unions, doctors serving the people, gay rights advocates, environmental activists, solidarity movements with what was then called the "Third World", political theatre, and so on: together we could make a difference. We made and wrote plays of which the titles alone left no room for doubt as to our ideas and expectations: "Leve het gewin, we stikken erin" ("Long live profit, we're chocking on it") or "Hoe eerder hoe beter, zei de arbeider, en hij dankte zijn baas af" ("The sooner the better, said the worker, and he sacked his boss"). Society, the other, the oppressed, no matter where around the world, were important; the world's common interest was more important than one's own profit.

6.
If we define idealism as "acting on the basis of an unshakeable belief in the possibility of a better life", then we were the bearers of a fervent idealism *and* great optimism. In its philosophical meaning, idealism is a theory that holds first of all that reality is a product of one's consciousness, the ideas one has in one's mind. But that was

not the theoretical foundation on which the movement of '68 rested. We drew support from the materialist philosophy of Marxism which holds that the social being, the materiality of existence, in the final analysis shapes man's thoughts, emotions, mental processes. We knew that people living in huts would inevitably think differently, and see society differently, than people living in palaces. We were aware that there were classes in society who had different needs and concerns, and that this would inevitably lead to the emergence of social struggles.
The achievements of the Enlightenment were not yet being questioned at that time. We believed in the power of reason, in the power of the word. We also believed in the power of progress, in hope, in the possibility of improving the world. We were convinced that the true nature of life in society was being hidden from view by an ideological veil. We wanted to do what we could to remove that veil from in front of others and ourselves, so that another perception of the world could clear the way for another activity.

7.
And yet, despite our efforts and enthusiasm, the great revolution did not occur; the world seemed a more difficult place to change than we had anticipated. Our perception of the world started to sway, or was it the world itself which was swaying?

In "Between Two Colmars", an essay from his volume *About Looking*, John Berger, the English author and art critic who resides in France, describes two successive visits he made to the small French town of Colmar (in Alsace) to see Grünewald's famous Isenheim altarpiece: first, in 1963, and then again ten years later, in 1973. In the space of those ten years, the lives of many thousands of people would be radically altered. In his essay, written in 1973, Berger observes that for him, too, the years before 1968 were "a time of expectant hopes" and that "hope" was "a marvellous focusing lens". He attempts to compare with great precision the impressions Grünewald's altarpiece made on him at those two different moments. "I do not want to suggest that I saw more in 1973 than in 1963," he writes. "I saw differently. That is all. The ten years do not necessarily mark a progress; in many ways they represent defeat." The difference in his consecutive observations lies in the difference in his frame of mind at the time of observing: hopeful in 1963, doubtful in 1973. "Hope",

he wrote, "attracts, radiates as a point, to which one wants to be near, from which one wants to measure. Doubt has no centre and is ubiquitous." I quote further: "It is a commonplace that the significance of a work of art changes as it survives. Usually however, this knowledge is used to distinguish between 'them' (in the past) and 'us' (now). There is a tendency to picture them and their reactions to art as being **embedded in history**, and at the same time to credit ourselves with an over-view, looking across from what we treat as the summit of history. The surviving work of art then seems to confirm our superior position. The aim of its survival was us. This is illusion. **There is no exemption from history**. The first time I saw Grünewald I was anxious to place it historically. In terms of medieval religion, the plague, medicine, the Lazar house. Now I have been forced to place myself historically. In the period of revolutionary expectation, I saw a work of art which had survived as evidence of the past's despair; in a period which has to be endured, I see the same work miraculously offering a narrow pass across despair."

8.
The feeling gradually emerged that history was hesitating, stagnating. The more one anticipates an important change that will not come, the more the image of that big change will be affected. Until you yourself too, expectant, gradually become a different person. Despair is perhaps too strong a word. Disillusionment is probably better. But what is disillusionment if not the loss of illusions, the loss of a dream image that one once thought answered reality? Coming back down to earth can be unpleasant, but in itself it is a positive experience.

9.
1989 was another one of those turning points when perception had to be readjusted, a point at which processes that had been happening for a long time suddenly came to the surface. These sorts of turning points help structure and understand the slow shifting of social realities. Events that, thanks to their form and force, open our eyes, to the extent that we can no longer look away and the underground work becomes perceptible. Like the image of the burning Twin Towers in 2001, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 marked just such a turning point in reality. The whole Eastern Bloc "crum-

bled" in no time. But the joy at freedom's expanded territory also provoked a bitter aftertaste. The euphoria with which the victory of capitalism over communism was welcomed in the West left one feeling uncomfortable. One was all too proud of one's own righteousness. The collapse of the Eastern Bloc not only meant the victory of democracy as a political system over communist dictatorships, but also the disappearance of planned economy in favour of the free market. From that moment on, turbo-capitalism was given free rein to spread itself around the world. We were told that this definitive end to the Cold War also meant the end of ideologies. But at the same time, one soon took great pains to create a new enemy: that of the fundamentalist terrorist who represented Evil itself and drew all Muslim states along in his wake.

10.

1989 was not only the year in which the Berlin Wall came down. In that same year, a bloodbath took place in Tiananmen Square, in Beijing; Khomeini died in Tehran; the US invaded Panama; and in South Africa, the dismantling of the apartheid regime had begun. Once again, it was necessary to readjust the personal sign system which one used to interpret the world – especially with regard to Europe.

It has been twenty years already, but it seems as though since then, things have been moving at breakneck speed. What has happened since then, I believe, shall have required quite some readjustments and is still raising many questions, and this, not only for older people, but for all citizens of the world who, in 1989, were conscious adults.

Not only did economic and political upheavals take place which led to a new world order (and this process is still in full swing), but these changes also coincided with an unparalleled technological revolution. The digitisation of our daily practices, and especially innovations in communication technology and the mass media, have occurred so quickly that we are still trying to catch our breath. Perhaps one can compare this shock to the impact the discovery of the steam engine and electricity must have had on our ancestors.

The impact of these ongoing changes is such that our understanding of space and time, and even our perception of the world, have been turned upside down. Each international news item on the VRT news (Flemish Radio and Television Network) is accompanied by a

picture of a small globe, which will spin around so that one can zoom in on the place where an event is happening. What has taken shape in our minds in recent years is neither more nor less than the thought that we can, as it were, perceive and master that small globe as a whole *and* as an image.
But perhaps that is nothing new, either. What an improbable shock it must have been for our distant ancestors when they realised that the earth was not flat, but round.

11.
I wish to explore some of the recent changes to get a better grasp of how we perceive the world today, or how we could perceive it.

1)
Economically, the forging of a new world order is in full swing. The United States, Europe and Japan no longer stand alone on the highest rung of the commercial ladder. The expansion of the G8 to the G13, including the five emerging economies that are China, India, Brazil, South Africa and Mexico, has been under way for some time. Not 13, but 20 countries were invited to the recent summit in London to discuss the global financial crisis. And in 2005, the combined production of the five emerging economies was, for the first time, more important than that of the so-called developed countries (I borrow these figures from Rik Coolsaet's insightful book *De geschiedenis van de wereld van morgen* [The History of the World of Tomorrow]). The wealthiest countries thus no longer control the global economy. Europe, that has always seen itself, its economy, its culture as the centre of the world, Europe as the cradle of modernity, will have to face the fact that it can no longer claim its Eurocentric position. A number of worldwide surveys also show that pessimism is the dominant feeling in developed countries, whereas emerging and developing countries hold a more optimistic view of things.

2)
The unlikely speed with which we can communicate with the whole world today and with which economic decisions and transactions can be taken has led to an insane acceleration of our daily work environment. To keep making ever more money, one always has to be able to innovate, and companies must prove their flexibility to the market. This has led to demanding from employees that they be

available for multi-tasking, specialisation, fragmentation. No routine jobs anymore, no assembly-line work: this might seem like more freedom, but there is a price to pay for making people re-programmable like computers. And this price, as Richard Sennett has shown, is the loss of one's own professional history, the loss of craftsmanship, of lasting relations developed in a work environment, of emotional ties to work, of experience and confidence. The price of short-term thinking.

3)
Losing the opportunity to introduce a continuous narrative line in your life through your work is certainly not the only change in our experience of time. Modern communication technology enables us to follow virtually everything that is happening in the world in real time through sound and image: what impact does that have on us? On our perceptions, our emotions, our thoughts? Are we up to a life in "telepresence"? Improved living conditions and medical progress mean that in a growing number of families, not three, but four generations live together: what impact does that have on us? What relation can a child have with a great-grandparent, or vice versa? Are we up to simultaneity? Can we in fact do this: simultaneously drive a car, make a phone call, consult a GPS car navigation system and record the billboard messages that flash by? When elderly people just want to stop living, what impact does that have on our understanding of mortality and immortality? What impact does it have on our understanding of the notions of suicide and euthanasia? Etc.

What impact does it have on us if, as Peter Sloterdijk put it, we have to come to terms with the most important mental shift in Western civilisation in the twentieth century; namely, the shift from the primacy of the past to the primacy of the future. We draw up little lists of important things that we want to take with us from that past; we discuss the canon, cultural heritage, repertories, the final attainment levels; we elect the most important Belgian or Fleming etc. of all time. But none of this yields a real solution to the issue of how to deal with the past. If you were taught in the seventies about the importance of historical conscience as *the* means par excellence with which to read the contemporary world, this is a development that is very difficult to grasp.

4)
In as early as 1992, French anthropologist Marc Augé describes in his book *Non-Lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity) the sense of the acceleration of time and thus also of history, or better, of the process of "historisation". History is close on our heels, he claims: hardly has an event occurred, than it already belongs to history. Our daily lives today consist of a succession of events. Because only the "always-already-new" seems to sell, our society is increasingly obsessed with a compulsive neurosis: not only that of creating "always already new" products, but also of creating "always already new" trends and events. The increase in their numbers runs parallel to their decrease in value. The days behind us are filling up with a growing heap of insignificant man-made events, and this mountain, which we call history, is hiding from our view that which lies behind it, further back in time. This "overabundance of events" has saddled us with an "overabundance of information". We try, desperately and rapidly, to give meaning to all these events. "This need to give a meaning to the present (if not the past) is the price we pay for the overabundance of events corresponding to a situation we could call 'supermodern' to express its essential quality: excess." Our attempts to grasp the present in the hope of understanding life also affect our image of the future. The future seems to coincide with the present; science fiction has become reality; but the price we must pay is the loss of the idea of progress from which we used to gather hope, and about which we could cherish illusions. The future that was the source from which optimism and idealism could emerge.

5)
With the collapse of communism – and though those societies little resembled the new world we had once dreamed of – a very important idea was lost to the world, namely the idea that more than one social model was possible, that there were other possibilities, no matter how imperfect or lame. Should we then limit "utopia" to giving a direction to our struggles? Or should we ban the very notion of "utopia" since it seems that the longing for a better, for a perfect world, in practice – and even in the drafting of it on paper – will inevitably turn into a dangerous dystopia, an all-controlling dictatorship? The Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran defined utopia as

"the grotesque en rose". "A monstrous fairyland" will replace the image of the future, "a vision of irrevocable happiness, of a planned paradise in which there is no room for chance and where the least fancy comes across as heresy or provocation". But Cioran added: "You can repress everything in people except their need for an absolute". And he concluded: "No paradise is possible, except in the innermost of our being and, as it were, in the I of the I; and even then it is necessary, in order to find it there, to have observed all paradises, the bygone and the potential, to have hated or loved them with the awkwardness of fanaticism, and then to have explored them and rejected them with the skill of disappointment".

6)
The holistic vision of the world that, in the seventies already, we nourished in theory, namely, the sense that everything was interconnected, today seems to have become a reality. A single system spans the entire world. Like time, space too seems to be compressed. The internet, other real-time media, *and* tourism have made our world smaller. We can, as it were, communicate with anyone around the world as if they were our neighbours. The world is flowing into our lives and our homes. When a tsunami hit a number of countries around the Indian Ocean in late 2004 causing 300,000 victims, not only was this event brought close to us through real-time footage, but it also became clear how many Europeans spent their holidays there, as if it were a destination in the south of France.

There is more, however. Spatial concepts such as centre and margin, which were much in use in the eighties, now have a very different meaning. In the seventies, going against the existing social order at once meant that one was, in a sense, going to stand outside society. One would join a commune, sit on a mountaintop in Nepal or do some humanitarian work in some far-off place. But one would integrate the class society as little as possible. Today one has the feeling that "one can no longer stand outside society". Everything is in fact always immediately taken over: this has led to the contradictory sensation of being "locked up", though the world is open before us.
Any point can now virtually be the centre of the earth; in any large city one can find global phenomena pressed together. The world is like a broken hologram: each fragment contains the whole. Places

are interchangeable. But it is precisely because everything is so equal and similar that differentiation and individualisation are again important.
The field of tension between the local and the global, the universal and the territorial, is omnipresent. The centre and the margins, inside and outside, have, as it were, traded places. The global is the heart of the whole enterprise, regardless of where it is located: the heart of the economy, of communication, of mobility. The local has been pushed back outside, to the periphery, regardless of the place it occupies on a plan or town map. "In the world of supermodernity," Marc Augé writes, "people are always and never at home". We have all, in a sense, become displaced, nomads. Or, as the New Zealand performance artist Kate McIntosh puts it (she lived in a number of places around the world before settling in Brussels): "On each spot you lose your history. On each spot you can rebuild yourself. This gives you the possibility to alter yourself."

Constantly rebuilding a life, breaking up and starting over again someplace else: not everyone is up to this. A life in shards, fragments. "Attempts at being". There are no more grand or meta-narratives, but the need for narratives one can share with others has probably never been so important. Stories by which to somehow keep that fragmented life together. The more globalisation, the greater the need for particularism, individuality.

7)
Man's alienation from his environment goes much further than that. Flooded cities; forest fires that cannot be put out; ice caps that are melting and crumbling in huge blocks into the sea; animals that are dying out and others that are appearing in places where they were never found or seen before; rising sea levels; devastating hurricanes; the destruction of large tracts of forest; lakes and seas that are drying up and making way for the desert; unstoppable rainfalls and scorching droughts; masses of people on the move because their land is no longer inhabitable; conflicts over energy sources, food, water, etc. The excess that makes the world go around is destroying the world. What impact will this have on us? It moves us, but much too little. Because we are looking away. Because so far, we are still out of range. Just one figure (taken from James Martin's *The Meaning of the 21st Century*, published in 2006): 4.5% of the world

population lives in the US, but they produce 23% of all greenhouse gas emissions. Look at a world map, and you will see that the wealthiest among us are the greatest polluters, while those who are worse off live in those regions which now already bear the negative impact of the devastation of the earth; they will also be the first victims of future disasters. Etc.

12.
"Attempts at being". Man is a slow-moving animal who risks losing his way in the fast-paced super-modern world. The problems he faces are so overwhelming that on the one hand, he does not wish to see them, while on the other hand, he is desperately looking for beacons, support points, havens. He has a limited capacity for absorption, which means he often cannot manage the profusion of stimuli. There are limits to his memory, whereby he cannot deal with a large part of the information that is directed at him. He is increasingly dependent on machines. His reliance on technology is increasing before our eyes.
I am, perhaps, looking at all these facets of the globalisation issue too much through the filter of that pessimism that is typical of developed countries, that small percentage of privileged people who enjoy a good life on this earth. Too much through the filter of these timid hares that we are, who have so much that the thing most on our minds is the fear of losing it all. Maybe people experience globalisation differently elsewhere. Because the struggle to survive pushes all the rest aside. Because there is no other way there.

Time to go back, now. Back to the initial questions.

There is no exemption of history, and there is no immunity against the world. One's own little story and the grand, global narrative always meet at some point: the point where you stand, your standpoint. Different for everyone, and for everyone the same. This is where my longitude and latitude meet, at this point, at this moment. In my rucksack I carry a memory and a whole chunk of life, an artistic practice and some experience of the world. But the new world requires a new positioning, a positioning whereby one cannot put oneself at the centre of events, but neither on the outside, a positioning whereby one always remains jointly approachable and accountable.

Maybe a positioning as Judith Butler describes it in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*: "The ability to narrate ourselves not from the first person alone, but from, say, the position of the third, or to receive an account delivered in the second, can actually work to expand our understanding of the forms that global power has taken."

13.
Time to go back, now. Back to art.
The position of the omniscient author is probably definitely a thing of the past: no one is able to have an overview of the whole world and comment on it in any meaningful manner.
But how is the artist to find his way today in the multitude of impressions, thoughts, sensations, feelings? How is one to tackle that multitude? How is one to begin disentangling that knot? How is one to see clearly and how is one to convey one's questions to an audience?

I wish to do a short exercise.

1) Slowing down by bringing the image to a standstill
Images are so massively omnipresent in our daily lives that we can hardly see them consciously, but nevertheless, they touch us, affect us, lead us in a certain direction. Given the speed at which images reveal themselves to us and disappear again in a flash, to already make way for new stimuli, more and more artists, or so it seems to me at least, are focused on creating static or barely moving images by means of photography, film, video, holograms and many other technological applications, but also by means of older media, such as theatre and dance/movement. One can interpret their need to do so as a longing to bring time and movement to a standstill, to slow down, so that it will once again be possible to reflect on that which is seen. Against the overabundance of events, they are setting the frozen, static image, in which they wish to collect the wealth of data that each moment contains. It is never just an image; rather, it involves showing a moment that contains numerous layers of meaning. The image as archive, as memory. To capture the ongoing moment makes it possible to show the simultaneity of various metaphors. As in the *Stills* series or the representation *I/II/III/IIII* by Kris Verdonck. The dangling women's bodies in *I/II/III/IIII* reveal

in a flash both hovering angels and carcasses hanging from hooks. The image can carry paradoxes. The process of creating an (almost) static image out of a dynamic body or thing is in fact the opposite process of what Futurists and Suprematists were trying to do at the beginning of the twentieth century. In his so-called "prouns", El Lissitzky attempted to give two-dimensional images a three-dimensional perception by creating an apparent movement between the surfaces. In his "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting", Umberto Boccioni wrote: "The gesture which we would reproduce on canvas shall no longer be a fixed *moment* in universal dynamism. It shall simply be the *dynamic sensation* itself.... The construction of pictures has hitherto been foolishly traditional. Painters have shown us the objects and the people placed before us. We shall henceforward put the spectator in the centre of the picture." This different approach between then and now is the result of the different reality *and* its perception. The Futurists wanted to "capture" the new dynamics of society which they cherished; but today these dynamics are so painfully overwhelming that we would rather bring it to a standstill. Moreover, we may now have reached a point of oversaturation of moving images (television, film, etc.), whereas there was no television at the time and film was still in its infancy.

2) Slowing down by intervening in time

Another way of slowing down is by stretching a single moment in time, as in Ivana Müller's *Playing Ensemble Again and Again*, in which the moment of greetings after a performance is stretched in slow motion to a one-hour performance. This, too, is in contrast to the choices made by the Futurists, who were looking for a theatre of speed and "brevity". In their 1915 manifesto "The Futurist Synthetic Theatre", Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Emilio Settimelli and Bruno Corra wrote: "We are convinced that mechanically, by force of brevity, we can achieve an entirely new theatre perfectly in tune with our swift and laconic Futurist sensibility. Our acts can also be moments, only a few seconds long. With this essential and synthetic brevity the theatre can bear and even overcome competition from the cinema." And here too one can see the impact of technological developments: creating a performance in slow motion only became possible once, thanks to film, we were able to *see* slow motion, and thus imitate it....

Overall, the recent interest in "performance" can be tied to the longing for a more intense and conscious experience of the moment as opposed to the hectic flow of everyday life. Standstill and silence, but also stuttering, stumbling and almost falling: these are so many moments at which a flow that propelled us forward is interrupted, in which our thoughts, our senses can do their real work in peace and quiet.

3) Creating a space in which the spectator is mobile
As an organ, the eye needs frontality. If the world is a theatre, then the theatre is an eye. Experts have shown that the theatres built in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – in any case, after the publication of Johannes Kepler's *Optica* – reveal an architecture that is comparable to the anatomy of an eye. Our bijou flats are like eyeballs; from there spectators look through an imaginary lens at the level of the "manteau" onto the stage that is the world. This frontality has its limits. The ear is smarter; it can even catch what happens behind us; sound is in fact like water, creeping everywhere, filling the entire space, surrounding us, like an architecture or an environment. Creating an environment – what one might call "a space that is to be lived in for a short time by the audience" – is another artistic means of reducing and, as far as possible, guiding the abundance of stimuli to which we are normally exposed: it is within this space that the spectator can attempt to organise and summarise the information that he receives through his senses. He himself will determine any movement within that space, as well as the length of time he wishes to spend there. A further imposed application of this method is resulting in the immersion technique, a direct submersion, in which the spectator will sometimes entirely lose control of the stimuli, but where the experience of the synaesthetic whole will receive the whole emphasis.

Consolidating time, stretching the moment, enclosing space, etc.: these are part of the artists' task of brightening the world, of emancipating themselves and their spectators. They are part of a dramaturgy of perception which is still growing: the search for a work method through which the spectator – who is both an individual *and* a member of the audience – can consciously re-live the here and now. Also, it is this enquiry into time and space that has now brought the plastic arts and the theatre closer together.

14.
When time and space are handled simultaneously, there emerge a trajectory, a chronology, a development, a movement and possibly a story. The focus changes with the emergence of a story, since the emergence of a story will trigger the longing to follow that story: the attention will shift from the moment to the development, the shift from one moment to the next. The value of a moment is then limited to its function in the narrative chain. How can one reconcile the moment and the development, what happens simultaneously and what happens in succession? How can there be a story *in* a picture? Through its layerdness? Its direction? Can there be a chronology in the sense of "a time which elapses" without this resulting in a narrative structure?

Today, communication seems to occur more often through images, without having recourse to words. Language, that old and slow symbolic medium, has seen its status affected in both social and theatrical communication. William Forsythe has devoted a performance to this topic, *Heterotopia*, in which language acquires a spatial dimension. Language has become an image, a square peopled with characters, a Tower of Babel that has been flattened, made horizontal. And all these characters, including the audience, are following the inscription (but simultaneously the injunction) that Peter Handke wrote at the beginning of his wordless play *Die Stunde da wir nichts von einander wußten* (The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other): "Do not betray what you have seen. Remain in the picture." All letters of the alphabet are literally on stage, but no matter what the performers do, these letters refuse to form words, to create meaning. And yet, there is a constant communication on the stage: with bodies, actions, movements, sounds, images. In Romeo Castellucci's *Purgatorio*, "the reading of text" is turned into an image; this also occurs in Hooman Sharifi's *God Exists, the Mother Is Present, But They No Longer Care*, in which, during the representation, time is set aside for the audience to read the projected text. In Castellucci's play, the projected text includes descriptions of actions that will occur on stage, or not. He is playing with time, keeping us alert. The projected words make us pay attention.
What, in fact, is the relation between words and images?
What comes first: the image? Or the word? Was Wittgenstein right in claiming that the word always precedes the image and that we

cannot recognise unnamed images? As regards the latter, recent discoveries in neurology seem to confirm his claim. Our right hemisphere knows/recognises the image of a spoon, while our left hemisphere recognises the word "spoon". For the perception of that object in the world to be usable for us, both hemispheres must work together. Language and images have to come together for thought to be possible.

Every day in my work as a dramaturge, I observe how the naming of things leads to a readjustment of the perception of those things, and vice versa. In order to talk about new realities, a new vocabulary has to be developed. To name, to try to describe reality seems to me to be the first task that we have to take on in the face of the confusing reality that surrounds us. In order to decipher the world, to be able to narrate the world, we must indeed believe that it can be described. Maybe that offers one possibility, an initial boost. In order to understand something, we must be able to imagine it. For understanding to be possible, word, image, thought and imagination must come together.

15.
It will be up to us to develop new hopes and a new optimism. To do so we can draw strength from art – as Berger drew on Grünewald's altarpiece – *and* from artistic practices. In *The Culture of New Capitalism*, Richard Sennett looks in detail at the decline and loss of craftsmanship, which he defines as "doing something well for its own sake": "The more one understands how to do something well, the more one cares about it.... Getting something right, even though it may get you nothing, is the spirit of true craftsmanship." "Craftsmanship" as a form of "commitment", then. Though they may be struggling, artists belong to society's "privileged" people, for whom the choice of a career automatically entails, or should entail, a commitment. Though we need to pause in the face of the arts' social powerlessness, of the little that art is able to put in the balance, we do at least have one trump card: the enormous energy that emerges from people who enjoy doing their work.
Striving for integrity remains for me an important motif in our practice. Doubt, too, including self-doubt. I would add: never take things for granted. Keep exploring, keep asking questions. Hold on to the slowness of our practices. Determine your own rhythm and

depth.... Take your time and take your freedom.
Something like: searching for clarity with passion.

16. Coda
And to conclude, two quotes on freedom:
The first is from Primo Levi, the Italian chemist, writer and Auschwitz survivor:
"The noun 'freedom' notoriously has many meanings, but perhaps the most accessible form of freedom, the most subjectively enjoyed and the most useful to human society consists of being good at your job and therefore taking pleasure in doing it."

The other is from Simone Weil, the French philosopher and political activist:
"True liberty is not defined by a relationship between desire and its satisfaction, but by a relationship between thought and action."

Marianne van Kerkhoven
Brussels, 23 May 2009

BIO

Marianne Van Kerkhoven (°1946) began working in theatre in the seventies. Since the early eighties, she has been the house dramaturge at the Kaaitheater in Brussels. It is in this capacity that she has worked with, among others, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Jan Lauwers, Josse De Pauw, Guy Cassiers. In recent years, she has been involved with a new generation of younger, more 'image-oriented' artists such as Kris Verdonck, Marijs Boulogne, Merlin Spie, Kate McIntosh, Hooman Sharifi, and the projects of the text-theatre company De Parade.

She has published extensively on theatre and dance, notably in *Etcetera*, the Flemish performing arts review. From 1990 to 1995 she was editor-in-chief of the quadrilingual review *Theaterschrift*. A collection of her essays was published in 2002 under the title *Van het kijken en van het schrijven*. She has received numerous awards for her work.

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