

*Giving Notice: Concerning the Role of Infrastructure in
Recent Dutch Contemporary Art*

[Lecture Script]

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[Appear preoccupied as setting up things while speaking]

Hi hi, yes, thanks for having me. My name is Heleen Schröder and I'm here to give a paper only recently conceived entitled *Giving Notice: Concerning the Role of Infrastructure in Recent Dutch Contemporary Art*.

[Shuffle notes. Click something on laptop. Make Powerpoint go to full screen. Powerpoint should be on Slide One: Title Page]

There we go!

[Collect self]

Okay, let's begin.

[Pause. Interject self]

Ah, you'll have to forgive me, but I will mostly read from my notes here. Adrenalin and intention don't often marry in me.

[Push glasses up nose. Breathe. Say slowly for emphasis]

We who are at the university, *who is 'we'?*

[Pause]

This is an empirical question as much as it is a theoretical one. And perhaps unknown, this question has a history. First posed in another form in 1929, after a visit to Oxbridge University, at a time in which women were not permitted entrance, Virginia Woolf asked;

[Change Powerpoint to Slide Two: Procession Image]

'One must strain off what was personal and accidental in all these impressions and so reach the pure fluid, the essential oil of truth. For my visit to Oxbridge and the luncheon and the dinner had started a swarm of questions. Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and

the other so poor? What effect has poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?' End quote.

[Pause]

Some eighty-two years later, in 2011, Isabelle Stengers and Vinciane Despret again take up this question, paraphrasing Woolf when she says;

'Page after page, she recalls the humiliations and exclusions, of all these 'daughters and sisters of educated men' who could not go to Cambridge like their brothers. To think that today those same men could ask their sisters to protect cultural and intellectual freedom! They quote Woolf, 'Suppose that the Duke of Devonshire, in his star and garter, stepped down into the kitchen and said to the maid who was peeling potatoes, with a smudge on her cheek: 'Stop your potato peeling, Mary, and help me to construe this rather difficult passage in Pindar', would not Mary be surprised and run screaming to Luisa, the cook, 'Lawks, Louie, Master must be mad!' End Woolf quote.

But Woolf doesn't stop with the incongruity of the Duke asking the kitchen girl to help him translate Pindar. She also wonders if it is good for this girl to climb up to the next floor... In other words, Woolf situates herself in a period of transition where the question can still be posed: 'Do we want to join this procession? And furthermore, what conditions will we accept? Where will it lead us, this procession of educated men?'

[Change Powerpoint to Slide Three: Procession Image List. Pause]

While the important and age-old discussion of inclusion underlines Woolf's *A Room of Ones Own*, upon reading it another critique reveals itself: this being one regarding infrastructure. The question of wanting to join the procession or climbing up to the next floor becomes synonymous in this case, therefore taking as their premise and already unequal exchange. Joining the procession is not capable of eventually producing this equality that Woolf seeks, since it presumes reaching

an already existing level, therefore answering *to*, rather than producing one for ourselves. As Stengers and Despret go on to state in their book, it becomes a question of ‘creating a we’.

[Change Powerpoint to Slide Four: Marx Base and Superstructure diagram.
Pause]

For me, this is still a question of infrastructure. If we can turn now to this diagram, we can see that it details Marx’s discussion of Base and Superstructure. In this theory, Marx claims that human society is compiled of two parts: the base, also known as infrastructure, and the superstructure. He claims that the base comprises the forces and relations of production – employer-employee work conditions, the technical division of labour, and property relations, into which people enter to produce the necessities and amenities of life. These relations determine society’s other relationships and ideas, which are described as the superstructure. The superstructure of a society includes its culture, institutions, politics, power structures, roles, rituals, and state. The base determines the conditions the superstructure, yet their relation is not strictly causal, because the superstructure often influences the base. The influence of the base however, predominates.

[Pause briefly]

A very general introduction, but let’s go with it for now.

[Pause. Take a sip of water. Continue...]

The sentiments expressed – that is, those of Woolf, Stengers and Despret, and Marx – have set up a premise and allow now for the transition to a discussion of three artworks by three Dutch artists. A leap indeed! But lets take up this fork in the road for a moment, and hope that these two strands will meet again toward the end.

[Pause]

Now, I first started considering the three artworks I will address from here on in a number of months ago, perhaps ten to be precise. A consideration of which obviously included their artwork form, but also

a contrast in relation to each other. Now, Let's give a moment to the first one.

[Change Powerpoint to Slide Five: Wim Blom. Pause]

The first work I would like to discuss is one made initially in 2009, but which has been consistently performed since.

[Cough]

Excuse me! So this first work, first exhibited in 2009 as I mentioned, is by an older Dutch artist named Wim Blom. And by older perhaps I mean that he is now working in institutions rather than studying in them.

[Laugh]

While there are a number of works of his that could be deemed relevant for this lecture, of particular interest is his performance titled *All knees and elbows of susceptibility and refusal*. Now I'm sure some of you know this work already, but perhaps a contextualisation is still needed. The work was first framed as a period of undocumented labour, performed within the context of an educational institution in the central eastern part of the Netherlands. Undoubtedly belonging to the lineage of institutional critique, the work instructed that it be performed by the artist himself and in accordance to the safety regulations of the building that was to house it. The problem, or maybe the strength, of talking about a work such as this is its undocumented nature.

[Change Powerpoint to Slide Six: Wim Blom documentation]

As you can see here in this slide, the only point at which the performance is documented is if the safety-check calls for work to be done. In which case, the contract, or the invoice often stand as documentation. Though, over the past few iterations of the performance, Blom has produced a quarterly report of the building, though only available on request. A work that you certainly have to know about to notice.

[Take a sip of water. Change Powerpoint to Slide Seven: Berentzen and Ruseler]

The second work of interest titled *When the watch is worn around the neck, it lies in direct proximity to the less regular beating of the heart*, is an ongoing work produced by collaborative duo Karin Berentzen and Annemarie Ruseler over the course of 2016. The piece sees the pair make and distribute a meal for guests of the institution that commissions the work. Made only distinguishable through the distribution of a placemat at each iteration of the performance, the work shifts in time, location, content and audience size, always preceding an event held at the institution in question.

[Change Powerpoint to Slide Seven: Berentzen and Ruseler documentation]

Acting as a kind of conclusion, or indeed, a preface, guests subsequently remain tied to the activity of being together for the duration of the meal. A work such as this, made at a time such as 2016, cannot help but be associated with relational practices of the nineties and early two-thousands, where cooking a meal seemed in and of itself a relevant contribution to the discourse of contemporary art. However, there is a departure from this utopian notion of forced sharing, in that this work by Berentzen and Ruseler doesn't occupy gallery spaces as a faux gesture of inclusivity, but rather, and almost parasitically, forces itself within the framework of institutions whereby the activity of eating a meal is already expected; examples of this range from universities, gallery board meetings to exhibition openings. In this way, the two don't produce a false sociality, but instead commandeer an already existing one.

[Take another sip of water. Change Powerpoint to Slide Eight: Sara van der Linden]

The final work, by Sara van der Linden, titled simply *Keys* takes up a similar form of occupation to Berentzen and Ruseler. However, pertaining to a fiercer form of militancy, van der Linden began this six year long performance work by gaining employment as an administrator at the international student office of a 'leading' institution. Again a work that disregards the art life boundary through sheer disagreement...

[Interrupt self as if adding this in the spur of the moment]

After all, she has been noted as saying that ‘the art world, now a global multibillion-dollar industry, is not part of the real world’ is one of the most absurd fictions in art discourse’.

[Continue normally]

Van der Linden abuses this position of employment through activities such as confusing policy issues by routing and re-routing them through an opaque complexity of committees, by rewriting minutes and by distinguishing where, when and how the critical decisions of policy are taken. A stunningly unsentimental observer of our idiosyncratic relationships, van der Linden then distributes her findings as ‘seemingly’ fictional text works, administrative documents and diagrammatic drawings that simultaneously call *and* hold to account.

[Change Powerpoint to Slide Ten: Sarah van der Linden documentation]

As can now be easily identified, one thing these works share is their location. Sitting within already existing frameworks, and often indecipherable as artworks due to this, each of the three practices in question dislocate themselves from the defining white walls of galleries, to develop works that absolutely transgress the fictional divide of art and life. Blom himself has said that *if* his work was just presumed to be routine maintenance – which despite being an artwork it also is exactly what it is – the notion of working and maintaining the institution would still be the primary thought. In the same interview he said, ‘I mean... how can you use an artwork? Or, what does calling something art *do*? A question I don’t know the answer to just yet, but calling something an artwork is an act that feels natural to me, and therefore, somewhere inside, I must believe that this act has potential’. End quote.

[Change Powerpoint to Slide Eleven: Keys. Take a sip of water. Adjust glasses]

Similarly, Berentzen and Ruseler said in a recent interview, ‘What does it mean to be loyal to your discipline? How can this be productive? How can it be more militant, more translatable?’

[Pause very briefly for emphasis]

To carry this further, we don't make art so as to call ourselves artists – though this is also a reality. But we make it because the frameworks of contemporary art are the ones within which we are thinking, from where we share our backgrounds, *from within which we push*. We must remain loyal to this stimulation. And we see that in order to remain loyal we must be working within the direct locations where this discipline develops, rather than treating them as holding stations for things we have made elsewhere.' End quote.

[Pause]

Now I have mentioned these practices because they can stand as an illustration of what I will call for now *disciplinary loyalty*. What do I mean by this? Well, a valid question.

[Exhale. Change Powerpoint to Slide Twelve: Disciplinary Loyalty. Sip water.]

I have been grappling with this term for some time, and in this moment I can decide that it is a form of institutional critique concerned with a commitment to, rather than a rejection of, the institution of art. Personally, saying this is almost saying nothing at all, because even practices that deny the institution cannot avoid its reach. But what I mean is that practices concerned with disciplinary loyalty assume that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with the institution itself, but rather that the problems are located in the conventions that currently manage and configure it. If we are to return to the brief discussion of Marx earlier, we could claim that these conditions can be infrastructural.

[Pause]

It is the use of infrastructural frameworks within the practices of Blom, Berensten and Ruseler, and van der Linden – be it the building itself or the email system – to take a form of control, and subsequent responsibility, in defending loyally this institution of art to which they so imperatively belong. They also then propose institution

building – or base building – as a form of artistic practice; a form that could house progressively practices concerned with superstructural questions, and which can avoid static representation through activity.

[Pause]

In organisational terms, ‘public works’ refers to a broad category of infrastructure projects, financed and constructed by the government, for recreational, employment, and health and safety uses in the greater community. It is here that I propose an inadequate investment, or development *in* and poor maintenance *of* our own public works within the discipline of art to be a key problem. It means that we indeed need to ask, how can our disciplinary loyalty be more militant, more translatable?

[Pause briefly]

Now for one last fork in the road.

[Pause briefly]

I remember hearing someone say on the radio, when the famous Glasgow School of Art burnt down, that it was the only building they could think of that had an exterior worthy enough for what was produced inside it. At the time this struck me as ignorant, superficial at best. I had studied there for some time during my undergraduate degree, and on more than one occasion, *the building failed us*.

[Pause briefly for emphasis]

Being a building so worthy meant that it was heritage listed. This meant that drilling into a wall to hang a painting – an act perhaps most standard at an art school – was a problem. It meant that the internet connection couldn’t travel through the thick structural walls, that the workshop was located inaccessibly in the freezing concrete basement... and the infrastructural problems go on.

[Pause]

This comes to mind now, when I think of Woolf wondering whether it is even productive at all for the maid to climb up to the next floor and discuss Pindar. Surely a building that is physically hierarchical in nature is not capable of producing a methodology that is horizontal.

[Pause briefly]

To couple this discussion alongside the work of Blom, Berentzen and Ruseler, and van der Linden, was an experiment at best – but one which had as its aim, a desire to understand the relationship between education building, both institutionally and infrastructurally, and contemporary art; a discipline to which I also belong, and loyally so. We know that art institutions are already constantly struggling to gain legitimacy of art workers as real workers, and that research and accreditation come in different forms to academia (though perhaps sadly not for long), but the question for me seems to be as follows: Who is working? Who is building? And what is being built?

[Pause]

Perhaps the precariousness of art institutions means that we should work on their foundations, and more militantly so. To extend the metaphor with a physical analogy, it seems that the only possibility is to generate an institution that is structurally sound, before it can withstand the weight of its discourse. Maybe a paradox, this could be true. But in a sense, starting from the ground out, and moving away from contested histories and conventions to which we do not wish to submit, could be a positive thing. If we are to exhaust the practices of Blom, Berentzen and Ruseler, and van der Linden completely, we could also note that they imply an autonomy in action, not collectivised through a shared building, but through a shared loyalty. In order to avoid this infrastructural dilemma, perhaps this is the ‘we’ that we are in search of.

To finish with whom we started, Virginia Woolf said;

‘I thought of the organ booming in the chapel and of the shut doors of the library; and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked

in.’

[Change Powerpoint to Slide Eleven : Invoice of service provided]

We who are at *this* university, *who is this ‘we’?*

[Pause]

When dispersed, how are we connected? And when locked out, how do we gather? To mutually agree to refuse to enter – is that not the liberation we are faced with as workers without a contract? And then to take this further, if we were to mutually agree at all, what would *this* workers contract look like? A vague proposition at best! Thank you.

[Nod with thanks. Shut the laptop. Return to your seat]

[End note: If someone asks a question at the end, look at your watch and politely say;

‘Unfortunately I’m aware that I’m well and truly out of time, but find me over dinner and I would be happy to discuss your question with you’]