

# THE CONFIDENCE MAN

## FRANS-WILLEM KORSTEN IN CONVERSATION WITH QUENTON MILLER

Anybody invited to realize a project in 1646 is asked to engage in conversation with a previously unknown correspondent.

This conversation takes place via e-mail and stretches through the whole period during which the artists develop their initial idea into final results. 1646 invites the correspondent at the other end of this contact to figure his/her way through this actual process.

In trying to picture what result the artists' work is going to, such exchange can become a reflection on the amount of otherwise untraceable choices of the moment which make up to the artists' practice.

This issue is part of the exhibition by Quenton Miller, *The Confidence Man*, January 21 2014 in 1646. The exhibition is part of *The Ongoing Conversation* series, a collaboration between 1646 and the Master Artistic Research, The Hague.

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Frans-Willem Korsten [FWK]: There's something interesting about the fact that it's set on a boat. Right? In a sense there's something different about a boat from lets say a stagecoach and also a train, where you'd also find people sitting packed together. So it's the isolation of the thing on a river that gives it a dream status.

Quenton Miller [QM]: The Mississippi river, heading down to New Orleans.

FWK: But also any kind of ship that's out on the water immediately gets a dreamlike aura. And if you translate it philosophically it might come down to immanence, there's nothing but the boat. I mean you can look at it from a distance but then you're not on the boat, once you're in the boat world surrounded by sound, sound that is not human and within that kind of capsule or cell, things start to evolve. As a result of which, I think if you would want to read the novel in it's analysis of something that still structures our society, it's also like Marx giving an analysis of capitalism that up until this day is adequate or working, and the same would hold for this novel I would say. It is a diagnosis that is so powerful, so to the point that it has not lost it's accuracy or it's urgency. But part and parcel of that diagnosis is the dreamlike status of capitalism itself. As if we're on a boat. As a result of which every dialogue, every meeting gets another edge or another kind of light. And in that sense I would say the novel itself is kind of performative. It's not just a description of something that happens, but in describing what happens it is performing what it is describing. So the beautiful thing about the dream is that it is alienation without alienation. Right, you're in a different reality, it's not yours, and as soon as you get out of it you know that it was a dream. And there are specific dreams, lets say lucid dreams in which you kind of sense that you're in a dream but are not able to get out of it either and it's a one time trick. You couldn't write another Confidence Man.

QM: Why not?

FWK: Suppose we would think of capitalism after capitalism, let's do it another time. Let's do capitalism again. Why? We've had that dream. You can have other dreams. A powerful dream that travels with you and stays with you is a one-time trick. You can't redo it like a performance. You described doing the performance in a studio light environment I think that's a wise decision as it turns the environment into a capsule. You can't step into the boat, once it's out in the water it's a thing in itself travelling through space and time and I think this studio format resembles that.

QM: Though in the book you never believe the stories people are telling. You're aware it's a trick but it still goes on.

FWK: But I think that would fit into the analogy of the dream. I think it was Bergman that said it of Tarkovsky, he was the only one who was able through cinema to step into the dream. And there's something about this book, specifically this book, that has this dreamlike status, as if you're looking through strange glass at what's happening and what you're hearing, and you're right in saying that you never get into it really although there's something in the language that has an enormous pull. So there's the distinction between lets say what's being described in terms of imagery and in terms of what you can imagine in the rhythm and in the sound of the dialogues that doesn't have that distance that you described, it's as if the voices kind of get into you. That was my experience of reading it.

QM: It's a very manipulative book too.

FWK: It's a very manipulative book. But here as well it's also performing what it's describing. But also of interest is who is reading this now days?

QM: Not many people.

FWK: No. I've never read it until this project. So I did a check on whether it's used in courses - hardly. So what is its manipulative force? It's not that you can kind of just give it to any audience, even a well-trained audience, and it would work through manipulation. I think it would bore through manipulation or they would not finish it. Because there's also a kind of exuberance in it, as if there's too much. Which is not just a matter of length.

QM: Because there are a lot of ideas?

FWK: Are you implying that it's difficult to know what ideas are meant seriously and what ideas might even be mockery?

QM: Yes, he's parodying all sides, and it's not a funny parody, it's an uncomfortable parody.

FWK: Linda Hutcheon has written about this - serious parody. There's such a thing as serious parody. And I think it's a very Baroque Novel, in the sense that the Baroque in its most powerful manifestations is about the blurring of the boundary between illusion and reality. It's the same logic again, once you're not able to distinguish between reality and a dream you almost have an ontological parody structure. Which is not something to laugh with at all.

QM: Haha.

FWK: It's confusing. So if you take what Spinoza defined during the Baroque as the closed world in which we live, or the closed universe in which we live, if you think radical immanence, it's almost impossible to distinguish between dream and reality because you don't know. You've lost that certain point of reference outside. But still that would be different from capitalism's delirium. Which is not so much based on ontological closure that Spinoza is talking about, but that is

fleeting, again almost like a boat on a river, something moving underneath you, that carries you, you can't get out of it. It will bring you to the sea. It's something else then, which you could define as ideology. Any ideology will work through a dynamic that it gives people the idea that they think what they want to think, where it's simply the reproduction of the ideology. Lets say of any ideology that if it's effective it works naturally. But there's something in capitalism that's doing more than performing this ideological trick. It's really carrying us, carrying us all, it's impossible to get out of it. And even if you know it's false you will believe in it anyway, this is Slavoj Zizek speaking.

QM: Is that where performance comes in?

FWK: Partly. I would say it's a matter of all participants being complicit in what's happening. So the performance metaphor would still say you have performers, and an audience that is beguiled, or tricked, or mesmerised.

QM: But the audience performs too.

FWK: Yeah, if you mean it like this then you're right. Lets say all participants are complicit, they do the thing together, at times taking the role of the audience at times taking the role of the performer. Or the audience takes the role of a performer. Let's say giving the actor the idea that he or she is listened to. There's something in the novel as well about this position of the listener.

QM: Some of the speeches in the original novel are addressed to a dupe, and now we've replaced the dupe with the audience. What does that do?

FWK: I think it is a form of anachronism that is to the point, as all speakers in the novel speak as if they have another or larger audience in mind. It's never really people talking to one another. Let's say there's both something bigger behind the speakers as if there is something else expressing itself through them, and actually through the listener that is close something else is being addressed, which is again why the novel is not realistic. It escapes the logic of realism. So you're taking it up in terms of making the performance explicitly interesting?

QM: Yes.

FWK: So in a sense you thicken the line that defines the characters, which I think is necessary also as it's a novel out of another time-frame.

QM: But it's not that different from now. Some of the actors said straight away 'that's a TED talk'.

FWK: In a sense it's astonishing. How someone makes an analysis of a system that has gone through different historical phases, I mean it's not the same thing anymore. But there's a dynamic in it that's been brought to the light so lucidly in this novel. Actually I mean it's my job to read literature but it means there's lots

of literature that I find boring. Or good. But this was since I read Roberto Bolaño the first time again I thought 'wow that is exceptional'. But it does require a certain attitude, this is why I say it's not on reading lists, no one reads this anymore, and there's lots of texts no one reads anymore.

QM: Melville's *Bartleby* is everywhere. But why not this book?

FWK: *Bartleby* is shorter. But with this novel you really have to step into it. It is as if the text requires you to become part of the performance. As if you'd have to take a place on the deck yourself, or in a bed behind a curtain. So the novel doesn't work if you don't hear it. And *Bartleby* is easy to conceptualise. It's as if there's magic in that simple sentence 'I'd prefer not to' but it also makes it slightly too easy. But it's very hard to conceptualise this novel. In the performance that you're doing is the audience going to be addressed directly?

QM: Yes. I want the audience to be participatory even in it's non participation. Some performers will make pleas to the audience who might sit and stare. It's an experiment in what an audience can do, or whether anything can change.

FWK: There's also the possibility, at least in the novel, of someone shouting 'shut up'.

QM: People shout 'shut up' a lot in the novel, almost every scene has someone shouting 'shut up'.

FWK: Which I think in part is the idea of people not really talking to one another. It's, again, as if they're addressing another audience, and then someone from the side says 'shut up'.

QM: But even if they're not addressing the audience they're still transacting with the audience.

FWK: I would have to re-read it to see what these 'shut ups' are doing. For instance if you would translate it right now to what's happening with the banks, there's lots of people shouting in a sense 'shut up', but it propels the system instead of stopping it or really disturbing it.

QM: This is a really interesting point, a lot of movies like *The Wolf of Wall Street* are critical but at the end of the story everyone just fantasises about owning a yacht. It seems like there is something inherent in storytelling that does that. And of course this is Herman Melville's last novel. Or his last fiction work?

FWK: I think it is. He stopped. He shut up. That would be an option.

QM: No more stories.

FWK: This always frightens people if you say no more stories. 'No no, we need stories, we need hope.'

QM: Maybe the theme of the novel is maybe the danger of stories.

FWK: So if we go back to say the metaphor of the boat that is being driven forward, taken along, I think one of capitalism's marvellous tricks is that it doesn't have a story, where it gives all participants the idea that they are part of making the story. That's brilliant. There's no genius behind it - and that's even more fascinating, Capitalism doesn't even have a story. I'm giving classes now on the relation between capitalism and history to students. I have two questions and one is 'in which history are you partaking at this moment, to which history are you contributing' and they look at me as if they simply don't understand what I'm asking. The second one is 'so what are we headed for'. So the first phase of capitalism is anarchism and then it's being kind of vectorised by the nation states. Now it's turned global. So the vectorisation by means of nation states, or later, let's say the great ideologies; democracy, communism, Nazism all used capitalism, even the Soviet Union was state capitalism, China - same thing. But now what? So the nation state, it's not gone, but it's not kind of vectorising capitalism, the great ideologies - gone, not vectorising capitalism, so what are we in? No clue. And when I ask my students do you think this is a problem. 'Why? No.' But they do think they are in control of their own lives, so they do have a story format, as if their life, their individual lives are part of a coherent thing. But that's not true. I think that the *mise en abyme* of the novel is the very last part where the thing you use to compare the bills...

QM: The counterfeit detector?

FWK: I think that's the *mise en abyme*, this man who is trying to find out how it's used and there's a kind of 'stop'. In a sense it says stop trying to find out what reality is, or what the real value is, or what the real bill is. Whereas I think this is the distinction between history and *geschichte*, English doesn't have a real word for it. There's something in daily lives, daily, reality that is still different from this thing that takes us along, and the question is whether you can tell that in terms of a story.