

Simon Wald-Lasowski in conversation with **Marjanne van Helvert** As part of the exhibition **He saved the world from harmony**

For more information about this and other projects,
check our website or scan the QR-code.



1646.nl

The Mead of Poetry
2021, 9 min loop
HD video

The Gossips
1959,
11.5 cm x 16 cm x 14 cm
Giuseppe Cappé
Capodimonte figure

***A warm soothing
bath of plastic soup!***
2021, 5 min loop
2K video

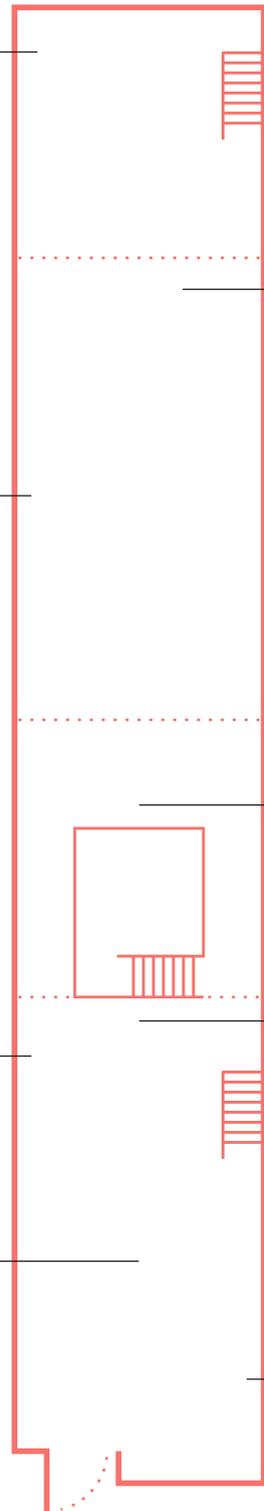
***My hair is like
laughing wind***
2021, 6 min loop
4K video

***We are sad enough to
laugh again***
2021, 114 cm x 85 cm
Glass, wood, electronics,
hourglasses

***A guy this clean
has got to be dirty***
2021, 125 cm x 31 cm
Polyester figure and hand gel

***He saved the world
from harmony***
2021, 85 cm x 240 cm
Hand blown glass,
steel beads, metal,
polyester figure

Toad catalogue
2018, 37 cm x 11 cm
Taxidermied toad, googly
eyes, metal, wood



Simon Wald-Lasowski

Simon Wald-Lasowski (b. 1980) collects, studies and mocks the iconography of images, objects and signs that are so prevalent in contemporary society. Simultaneously, his multiform practice conveys a genuine love for disdained tacky gadgets and obscene curiosities, which he obsessively hoards. Objects become actors in satirical subversive installations, which confront viewers to absurd issues of the human condition and to the enormous underbelly of our morbid consumerism.

Marjanne van Helvert

Marjanne van Helvert (b. 1982) is a designer, researcher, writer, and educator. She received an MA in Cultural Studies from the Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen (2007) and a BDes in Textile Design from the Gerrit Rietveld Academie Amsterdam (2013). In projects such as the *Dirty Design Manifesto* (2013, www.dirty-design.net) and the publication *The Responsible Object* (2016, Valiz Publishers), she explores design ideologies in the past, present, and future.

1/10/2021 13:36

From: Marjanne van Helvert

Hi Simon!

We don't really know each other, but when I looked online at your work, I remembered that we actually met once! We were both part of the exhibition *De Dingen* (The Things), at Stroom in The Hague in 2018. I showed an installation called The Library of Material Rights or Material Rights for Materials Left which I built together with Pauline Agustoni. You showed your film *Dusting Off / Shiny Nails*, a homage to both Claes Oldenburg's Manhattan Mouse Museum, and Tacita Dean's film tribute thereof. I remember the exhibition and public program at Stroom as very inspiring and fun, where a lot of works and ideas on human-object relationships were explored in the context of the anthropocene/capitalocene. Some of them quite straightforward, such as the *Embassy of the North Sea* and my own installation, some a bit more ambiguously poetic, such as your work.

I was wondering, in hindsight, how did you feel about being included in this exhibition? Do you feel at home in the context of questions around anthropocene or capitalocene in terms of the relationships between us humans and the material world that we have created and that has produced us? What other themes in your work would we be missing if we saw it only in that exhibition?

I look forward to your replies!

All best,

Marjanne

5/10/2021 17:35

From: Simon Wald-Lasowski

Hi Marjanne!

Thank you for your lovely email. Your memory is better than mine. I recognised you when searching for your name online but I could not figure out where we had met. Stroom it was!

I froze the last few days, it's not good for me to have too much time to think about my answer. I will try to keep my reaction more fluid and spontaneous next time, promise ;)

You ask me: "Do you feel at home in the context of questions around anthropocene or capitalocene"? I didn't know the term capitalocene, so that doesn't make me feel very at home with the subject, although I might be dealing with it intuitively!?

I just read that capitalocene deals with the climate crisis: "A world of political difference lies between saying "Humans did it!" - and saying "Some humans did it!"

This notion rings true of my practice, which is ingrained in (my own) white middle-class spending power, Western excess, consumption, accumulation and capitalism. My work also deals with the potential of love, respect and friendship between humans and objects though. These relationships can be nourishing as well as toxic. In that sense my position isn't one of moralising or of pointing fingers but of trying to navigate this dilemma of attraction/repulsion. How can I find cuteness in this thing that is destroying me!?

So yes, there is a political layer in my work, and my usage of animal symbolisms and plastic materials creates a clear link to themes of the anthropocene and the capitalocene.

Yet I feel that most artworks made in this day and age are intrinsically interwoven with waste. Your philosophy of Dirty Design (www.dirty-design.net) really resonates with me: "First of all, it is dirty in the material sense. However ethereal and glamorous a design object might be when you look at it in a shop, it is inevitably made out of chopped down trees, toxic minerals mined by the less fortunate workforce in our global society, stuff that grew on (or in) animals, chemical solutions devised in laboratories, and lots of oil, that ever so precious but ultimately disappearing resource."

I have an issue with categorizing works in themes though. Many thematic exhibitions use artworks as a means to illustrate ideas. I understand that this format can be a powerful educational tool, but it doesn't touch me. I find this approach too didactic, lacking magic. I am often more interested in exhibitions that stimulate viewers to make poetic links and absurd connections between the pieces and create their own narrative.

You also ask, which themes would be missing if my work was only placed in contexts such as the above. I feel that the core of my work is based on symbolic questions around the human condition and deals with 'classic' subjects such as existential angst, addiction, desire, sexuality, joy, love and death. Yet, recently I was commissioned to make a work for an exhibition about Disney at the HNI. I love that the curator saw me as a 'world builder' and was interested to place my universe along Disney's.

In a practical sense, many of my pieces are an attempt to create tools that allow me to slow down and calm my general feeling of anxiety. As dreadful as some of my spaces may be I often find myself wanting to live in them for a while. I let myself be hypnotized by the colours and textures of excess in an attempt to cure my desire of possessions. It's kind of an antivenom tactic, where I dilute some poison in a space to attempt to heal myself, and hopefully others too.

Have a nice day! Looking forward to seeing where this conversation will lead us to!

Simon

12/10/2021 13:39

From: Marjanne van Helvert

Hi Simon,

Thanks for your elaborate response! I understand your ambivalence about themed exhibitions where a work can be made to feel streamlined into the narrative of the curator. Although it can also offer unexpected invitations to the audience to exit this narrative perhaps. I felt like your work was doing that in the exhibition at Stroom. Because you yourself were such an important subject and actor in your film, you brought another level of sensitivity and even human vulnerability to the topic. I'm excited to read your own questions and motivations around your work. I personally recognize the attraction of being hypnotized by the objects you collect and surround yourself with, and them becoming vessels for coping with anxiety. It makes me think of compulsive hoarding, something that is classified as a mental disorder when it reaches severe and impairing levels, but which is to some extent familiar to many people, especially in our consuming-obsessed society. I think hoarding, aside from the obvious damage it can cause to some people's mental health and quality of life, is also in a strange way an act of care and of appreciation. Perhaps we should all be a bit more like hoarders, and not throw away our stuff as easily as we tend to do. Do you feel related to the drives and emotions that compulsive hoarders seem to have, and the relationships they have with objects? Do your own collections ever inspire real fear in yourself? Perhaps this is too personal a question, but I'm intrigued by the specifics of your antivenom tactic..

I guess the HNI exhibition about Disney gives you the opportunity to highlight a different view on your work and on topics of collecting and hoarding. You mention 'world building,' which makes me think of fantasy or science fiction. Do you see your 'universe' as something that might also be inhabited or observed by creatures other than humans? Or perhaps a different kind of humans or humans from a different age (past or future) ...? Maybe now I'm reading too much of my own fantasies in there, but I'm curious to hear what you think!

Best!

Marjanne

12/10/2021 20:39

From: Simon Wald-Lasowski

Bonsoir Marjanne!

I'm really enjoying this! It's a pleasure to exchange thoughts and questions in this manner with you.

Compulsive hoarding can indeed take extreme forms with severe repercussions. But I agree that it is too often judged and mocked by mainstream media, when there is also a beautiful element of care about it. Objects can really bring comfort. We could learn to throw things less easily and cherish what we have. So yes, I do feel kinship and compassion for hoarders and share some of their drive.

For a long time I didn't see my own collecting as problematic. I use objects for my work so my collecting is professional I would tell myself. I didn't think that it had a negative impact on my life. Yet there is an invisible psychological weight that comes along with having responsibility for your possessions.

My father Roman passed away 6 months ago from a very aggressive cancer, I miss him dearly. During the 7 months of his ordeal I started giving away some of my 'object archive,' as an exercise in letting go. I realised that keeping objects makes memories and situations last, but that it is also an attempt to delay the inevitable, to deny death and time passing.

The other night I stumbled across the series "*The Joy of Letting Go*" by Marie Kondo. I had heard about her and was curious. She suggests touching every object and asking oneself, does it spark joy? If it doesn't (anymore), one should thank the object and part away with it, wishing it luck on its new path. This really resonated with me. Since being confronted to the fragility of life in a deeply personal manner I feel more generous with some of my objects and wish them to bring joy to others. But I still have a long way to go, my archive is still very full :)

On the subject of fear and antivenom, I could say that at home I surround myself with objects that spark joy. Objects that I find comforting and that carry memories. They really are friends! Yet in my studio I surround myself with objects which initially trigger fear, disgust, and repulsion in me. They are more like enemies! I try to understand why I rejected these objects (by attempting to deconstruct my judgment based on socio-economic class, cultural background, moral education, etc...) and to slowly see them as

worthy of love. Is this an empathic saviour complex?! Anyway, the question when I see a new object-actor for my work is: does it spark disgust? This practice has made my tolerance to 'object horror' high, so in a way I am always looking for a higher dosage of disgust. This is not a tactic to take me out of a sort of emotional numbness; I am for example too sensitive to horror films and haven't watched one for 20 years.

The saviour complex is also maybe present in the fact that I started buying people's collections. Many people sell their collections online from one day to the next. They get fed up with the obsession or realise that a collection will never be complete, and that the excitement of adding a new piece to the whole is also a short lived satisfaction. Collections are also sold by family members stuck with a deceased person's 'life work'. By using these collections as actors/holders of meaning in my work I attempt to give them a new life.

I would love to hear more about your sci-fi fantasies. Would you like to elaborate a bit more on that? Someone once described my collection of €1 trinkets as the 'arrowheads' of the future. These seemingly worthless items might have archeological importance someday?!

Liefs,

Simon

14/10/2021 19:14

From: Marjanne van Helvert

Hey Simon,

I'm so sorry for your loss! Cancer is nothing but awful, and losing a parent must be such a sad and heavy experience, especially if it is too early. I wish you all the strength and love that is necessary to deal with that. Thank you for sharing it. I'm quite moved by the way you describe giving away some of your objects as an exercise in letting go. I agree that a big part of our drive to collect things must have to do with denying death and the passing of time, and hanging on to lifeless objects that seem to defy these. Perhaps paradoxically at the same time this lifelessness and timelessness is also what makes them a psychological burden. Could it be related to the taboo around death in 'western' culture..?

I've heard of the "does it spark joy?"-method of Marie Kondo, which I think is kind of a funny phrase that I'm immediately tempted to corrupt... For me at least I fear it might become an excuse to start collecting more feverishly, although I guess there is an essential difference between the spark of joy one experiences in buying or finding something, versus the spark it might still have after having owned it for a while.

Have you ever been to the Museum der Dinge (Museum of Things) in Berlin? It is one of my favourite museums and I think you would like it as well. It is essentially a design history museum showing a lot of famous icons of product design, but it also shows things that would never end up in a traditional design history canon: there's a lot of kitsch and weird objects and curious items on display as well, which I think makes it a much more truthful overview of industrial design history. Here's a link to a particularly fun exhibition on "*Böse Dinge, eine Enzyklopaedie des Ungeschmacks*" (Evil Things, an Encyclopedia of Bad Taste): [www.museumderdinge.org/exhibitions/evil-things-encyclopedia-bad-taste]. Your description of deconstructing 'enemy' objects and trying to find something worthy of love in them makes me think of questions around why something is deemed bad taste or bad design. I think nowadays there's also a renewed appreciation of all kinds of things that have been considered bad taste, as part of a revival of everything retro perhaps. Although there often seems to be an element of irony in there, which I have the impression you are sincerely trying to avoid.

Yes, I agree with the assessment of your objects as the 'arrowheads' of the future. In the past I've described our time as a fascinating era for future archaeologists. We are leaving so much behind that will be around for at least tens of thousands of years: plastic objects, synthetic textiles, electronics, enormous steel and concrete constructions, an infrastructure of asphalt and cables and rails that span the entire globe... Not to mention the more intangible stuff like nuclear radiation, CO2 displacement, the traces of a mass extinction event of plants and animals. It makes me want to imagine who the beings could be that might find all of this stuff in the future. Since nowadays we already have so much trouble understanding archaeological finds or interpreting texts from a few millennia ago, I wonder what a future intelligence might make of what we leave behind.

You asked me to elaborate on my sci-fi fantasies. In the context I have just described, I'd be so excited for these future beings to find your artworks! For them to dig up a white walled gallery with leftovers of your collections inside, and to have them marvel at those same colours and textures. Would they experience the same combination of attraction and repulsion that we do? Or to think of an A.I. scanning and analysing the remnants of your studio, wondering what this unique assembly of objects might mean in the context of the civilisation surrounding it.

I think that this moment in human history, where we are confronted with things like climate change and mass extinction, which are way too large and complex geographically and temporally to be completely comprehended by us as individuals, it forces us to consider a larger timescale where our industrial capitalist civilisation is just a red hot blip in cosmic time. For me at least, this is an invitation to meditate on what is meaningful within this civilisation of ours, and how it might appear to someone completely alien to it. They will receive a random mix of different generations of objects and materials; what dots will they connect?!

Whoa, big fuzzy questions :) I too enjoy this conversation a lot!

Have a lovely evening!

Marjanne

18/10/2021 17:59

From: Simon Wald-Lasowski

Howdy!

Wowzy, big fuzzy questions indeed! Thank you for sharing your sci-fi fantasy regarding my work and for your reflections on complex issues. I don't know if I have the capacity to delve into these subjects right now, or if I have anything worthy to add, maybe it's good to leave these questions hanging?

I forgot the source but I remember reading that (classical) sculpture is inherently linked to death in the sense that bodies represented in stone, bronze or metal will outlive the fleshy bodies that contemplate them.

In that sense I am becoming suspicious of work made to be 'preserved for eternity', and glorified in museums. I am more and more interested in the temporary aspect of a sculpture. Many of my pieces incorporate organic materials, which deteriorate and would be a nightmare for institutions to acquire! Some of my work is currently placed outdoors and has been dealing with sun, rain and storms for months. Rust is appearing; the objects show signs of wear. I feel my inner judgment thinking that these pieces are now damaged and less valuable, when they are actually maybe loaded with much more truth? Yet they are also made from polyester, so even in a 'dirty' state they will still outlive me.

For this specific exhibition I have been working on a gruesome hourglass figure, which consists among others of 2 huge hand blown glass shapes. It is fragile, heavy, and every step of the way people tell me that my idea will be very hard to realise. The sculpture is nearly completed, which feels already to me like a huge achievement! But whether it will make it in one piece to 1646, and whether it will survive a month of exhibition I don't know. It might collapse or break after a day. In which case it would have become a performance? A story? A memory of what it could have been? It seems therefore that my current sculptural interest is not linked to the notion of 'immortality' but is closer to an ephemeral act, to human fragility?

I don't know the Museum der Dinge, thank you for the tip! It sounds like something I would love to visit. And it's great that it gives space to objects omitted from design history. I felt suspicious at their naming of 'bad taste' in a title, which often seems to target a certain audience, which might put itself in a higher position of judgment.

I read on the site of the museum a more nuanced view on bad taste though: "The evil nature of the objects derives not from their purpose — from acts that could be performed with them — nor from their symbolism, but from the evil or badness that is manifested in their production, design and functional quality." They also mention a "catalogue of mistakes" which I find a beautiful potential title for something.

I am so tired... A main thread of this exhibition is an invitation to slow down, rest, and contemplate. Yet I've been working day and night and the process is anything but restful. Yet another absurdity!

This conversation will come to an end soon. I believe we have to finish it in two days. If you have more thoughts I would be happy to read them, or we can slowly wrap this up, in this form, for now. What do you think?

Peace,

S

18/10/2021 17:59

From: Marjanne van Helvert

Hi Simon,

Yes, these questions are meant to be left hanging, I think :) They might be even better that way. We have explored quite a few dimensions in our conversation, though there's much more we could discuss of course. But I'll leave you to finish your work for the exhibition.

I hope everything works out with finalizing your work and transporting and setting it up. I'm really looking forward to seeing your work, and am now particularly excited by the promise of impossible hourglass. It is in any case a huge achievement! Unfortunately I can't make it to the opening but I'll make sure to come by in the month after.

Thank you for this lovely conversation. Good luck and take care!

Marjanne