

A bed, a Sunlounger and a Necklace

It's often the breakfast table that brings me to discuss the most daily of sayings. When I sneeze (again) one early October morning, an Estonian, a German and I (a Belgian) start to discuss whether there is a neutral way to soothe someone after a sneeze, in English. In Estonian and Flemish language as well as in German, when someone sneezes, the 'must-say' word is 'health!'. In English however, you wish them blessings. Though health is ofcourse one of the greatest blessings one can get, all of us agreed there is something more 'down-to-earth' about health. To bless someone feels like a sign from above, from something bigger than us. But then again, one could argue, a blessing never harmed nobody.

This last expression inspired the video installation of Latvian artist Liga Spunde, which I encounter in the Moxy Hotel in Lille. The artist and representing gallery Kogo with Liina Raus are invited to *Around Video* by Julija Cistiakova. During the first weekend of October, 4 floors of the hotel are hosting the video fair. This is part of Lille3000, a recurring cultural event since Lille was the European Capital of Culture in 2004. On and off, the city continued to organize international thematic exhibitions of contemporary art, with this year's theme and title "Utopia". Arriving in the hotel, I run into Estonian artist Kristina Norman in the lobby. Her video is on view on the second floor.

I am not accustomed to seeing that many people in hotel corridors. As far as my experience goes, I meet the cleaning staff, or maybe another guest on his fixed route towards his room. There is a certain anonymity that comes with a hotel. A hotel is a place you pass by, where one can easily hide, and no traces are left. I am the least interested in what my neighbors are doing, and would prefer not to hear them nor run into them. This feels different: passages are filled with chairs, people are standing still and having conversations, and I can (without shame) look into every room, as the doors are wide open. They are marked with name tags, which are not only accurate during the visiting hours; the artists and gallerists actually sleep in those rooms at night.

A peculiar setting, but it is not uncommon for contemporary art to end up in alternative spaces. During the student protests in 1968 in Belgium, when the Palais de Beaux-Arts was occupied, Marcel Broodthaers opened '*The Modern Art Museum: department of Eagles*' in his living room. The so-called museum reappeared in

various shapes over the following years. In Estonia I witness Gallery Mihhail asking for white-cube free shows, as well as Hoib Gallery providing intimate exhibitions, always underground, in a space that's originally the basement of the gallerists apartment. Apartment exhibitions have a counter-institutional freedom with their informal touch.

While both spaces contain a bed, a cupboard, a shower and a chair, a hotel inherently differs from a home. I enjoy its sheets (can somebody tell me where on earth they get those sheets?) but the room always feels indifferent. The space doesn't embrace me as my own. Hotels are a prime example of Marc Augé's non-places. Places for everyone and no one. They are impersonal and they are asked to be neutral, deprived from any convincing personal touch. This could actually make them the off-space brother of the white-cube. However, off-spaces seem to fall in the hands of institutions again, since a hotel is also an institution, be it of a different, commercial kind.

But similar to a guest staying in a hotel, every artist and gallerist at *Around Video* is free to deal with the room as its own. Walking through the corridors, I find the regular rooms, with the video running on the original tv of the space. Other galleries have moved the bed slightly, brought their own pedestal or even a fake wall and show the piece via projection. Some rooms have framed photos or paintings, leaning against the wall, or sculptures that are carefully placed on the desk. With the gallerist's jacket hanging on the coat-rack, it's impossible to create a neutral room, but I still notice the attempts to do so.

The most successful rooms are the ones that instead of avoiding or ignoring the specifics of the space, incorporate them into the work. When I enter Kogo's room, a pair of socks peaks from under the bed. What could have been a trace from the one inhabiting the room, turns out to be one of the digital images from the artist's discourse, printed for this occasion on socks. The colorful towel with another print is drying over the edge of the shower. On the coat rack, a polyester foam necklace glances at me from one of the hangers. I sit down and start watching the video playing from the tv.

I hop in from the middle. I am looking at a couple having a conversation. The space around them is black, their dialogue is intimate. They talk about caretaking. It feels as if there is a lot of backstory going on. Things are at play which I don't know about:

as if you walk into a stranger's room via the back door from the garden straight into the kitchen, and overhear a slice of life that you are not a part of. There is hostility which I don't understand. At the same time, their conversation feels a bit robotic, and the space seems constructed: I might as well be watching a rehearsal of a play. Two objects in the video appear like props. They are referred to as their babies and are the main subject of conversation. Looking around the hotel room, I notice the same two babies laying on the bed next to me. And then the scene changes: a woman is rocking in a sunlounger in her garden.

Spunde's work makes me experience a shift in space. I watch an intimate discussion from an intimate space. I am sitting next to a bed, watching a woman lay down while actually hearing flows of thought. Is this hotel room mirroring the dark room of the story, deprived from its personal touch, but still attempting to feel personal? The dialogues, but most of all the sculptures play an essential role in this. With their candy-like colors and soft squishy structure, I can almost sense their materiality from a digital screen. But it's their repetition, right next to me, that's interesting. Was it the artist's craving for tactility? Are they a literal translation? My gut says they function like a talisman, small portals that allow me to not only relate to the world on screen, but insert myself in its various dimensions. They are the ones that add a fictional touch to the space I am now in, a hotel room.

There's No Harm In Any Blessings was previously shown at Survival Kit 11 in 2020 in Riga, but at *Around Video*, the installation is set up differently. In Riga the visitor walks between the objects, with structures such as fences guiding their movement. The video piece appears further in space. This turns it into a potential story, one of the many possible happenings in this world. At the fair however, the video becomes the central piece. The narrative functions as a document of the past, the origin. The objects, lurking around, involve me in the story inside this anonymous hotel room. Hereby, Spunde allows the space to dictate the work. A conscious choice that works in the advantage of the piece.

How space influences subject interests the artist: various dialogues of the video are directly borrowed from the experiments on David Vetter, also known as the Bubble boy. Vetter was born with a severe combined immunodeficiency, which determined his short life to be lived in a monitored, disinfected bubble. The artist is captivated by his parents' decision to keep him alive like this. Most importantly, by a wish for a miracle to save him. Whether truly religious or not, would not everyone risk a little

prayer out of love? At the start of the video, a gardening hose waters the bushes from the left side. While an overdose of water flows over the greenery, the hose still moves to the right side and repeats the action. Just in case? Maybe it does make a difference.

In any case, *Around Video* draws attention to the delicacy with which Liga Spunde incorporates context in her multimedia practice. Represented by Kogo Gallery, she has previously participated in captivating group shows together with Estonian artists such as Eike Eplik and Laura Põld. I notice collectivity in these material practices about ecologies. Although artists and art workers tend to create their own bubble and bathe in it, I am excited about the merging and contrasting foam initiated by Spunde and Kogo, be it between artists or an artist and a space.

Laura De Jaeger, Published in Estonian on 4.11.2022 in Sirp.

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