

Going public

I can show you a goal with the ball in it or I can show you a goal with the ball in front of it and you can kick it in yourself, which would be more satisfying? Hopefully my work functions as a tool to intensify and activate your own imagination...

Surprisingly, when I approached Dutch artist Yeb Wiersma last spring with the idea of writing an article, I discovered our shared interests exceeded my initial expectations. As artist-in-residence at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Yeb had handed over her portfolio, a small neatly packed box full of lushly documented projects for me to peruse, I was intrigued. By the time we met again I was eager to question Yeb about her interest in site specific projects, her involvement with residency programs and her current activities in Melbourne. And so it goes.

Location features strongly in Yeb's practice and her ideas are formed from experiencing her immediate surroundings. Her work is site specific and almost simultaneously engages with public and private space. Whilst the works have an ephemeral quality evocative of a dream or memory, they also contain a sense of the familiar. Within her work is a sense of openness, which allows her to stretch and play with ideas -resulting in the subtle provocation of the unsuspecting viewer and often rousing a rethinking of ones initial response to her work. I imagine Yeb constantly observing her mental and physical environment and asking herself 'Oh... What if ...?'

Yeb's interest in public space is based on a conscious desire to disrupt the norms of public life, which are unconsciously quite formal and full of rituals and manners. As she pushes and pulls invisible boundaries important questions such as 'How public is public space?' are raised.

Walking on the streets, say for example Federation Square, you gaze upon huge billboards, advertising surrounds you and one can see the most obscene, tasteless images; but as long as one reads *David Jones*, *Versace*, etc it is fine and accepted. As advertising allows these unwritten rules to apply. On the other hand, if I felt like making a small, innocent wall drawing, it would be considered 'in the way' and therefore condemned and removed. The walls are apparently not designed for spontaneous expressions, unless you have asked permission to do so. Let's say I walked around barefoot, the majority of people would probably think 'Who is this strange woman?' and most likely I would think the same. I always find it astounding that so called 'public space' isn't so public or so open, after all and that we (unconsciously) behave differently when others are around. There is an interesting tension between the private and public, in public space. In general this relation between what we show, what is visible, and what we do not show, what is invisible (our thoughts, our past, our fantasies) has always fascinated me.



Yeb Wiersma, *Departure* (2001, NYC) photograph

What you see, is not always what you get...

Yeb has never felt that the formulation or presentation of her ideas could be limited to the traditional space of the gallery and studio, which makes me wonder where the ideas are conceived and formed.

Well my studio can be almost anywhere. Even in art school I could have had a studio. But I never used it. After I finished art school I tried to work in a studio because everyone else does (she laughs) and I ended up paying a lot of money, sitting in an empty studio and feeling scared. I noticed whenever I went out to get a coffee, the ideas would start popping up one after another and so I thought, 'Just say goodbye to the idea of a studio'. For some artists a studio environment works, but for me it doesn't. I like to see the world outside as an endless sketchbook. This is partly why I think artist-in-residence programs work well for me. Being somewhere else, (as long as I do not stay inside) having the comfort of strangers and exploring the new world around me helps keep me fresh.

Since graduating in 2001 Yeb has endeavoured to find suitable working models whereby the smaller activities such as drawing and taking photographs, which help to sustain her larger projects, are given space to breath. In doing so she has sought out specific residency programs to provide herself with an intensive living and working environment away from the routine of everyday life. When the opportunity for her to take part in the Kulturzentrum Nairs residency program in The Engadin Region in Switzerland arose in 2003 it presented an ideal physical and psychological landscape in which to dig deeper into her real and imagined childhood memories of this region. Surrounded by ubiquitous misty valleys, eerie evergreen forests and snow-capped mountains, the residency with its combined working and living spaces is housed in the beautiful and vast 19th century spa resort *Kurhaus Tarasp*.

Conjured years earlier in Yeb's young imagination was *this* dark landscape; a setting for the fantastic tales of the Brothers Grimm, later the scenery traveled through on family holidays. As a child she eagerly snuck out of bed and gripped with excitement and fear would listen to Grimm's fantastic tales on her parent's record player at early dawn. Here she created her own private universe which existed in stark contrast to the reality of the flat landscape of Holland in which she grew up. On her arrival at Kurhaus Tarasp Yeb immediately began developing a working process based on a more intuitive method of engaging in her practice in an attempt to shape those inexplicable memories. Outdoors she collected sticks and twigs and drew and photographed from the surrounding landscape. Indoors she explored the attics and sourced materials, such as woollen blankets once used by the patients, to make an assortment of knitted and sewn objects. *'Growing Dark'* was installed throughout the living/working space during her last week and cleverly considering the many aspects of 'site' presented by the residency. Consisting of soft sculptural objects such as bunnies, arrows, guns, along with drawings of children encapsulated by trees and photographs of the mysterious picturesque landscape, the work suggested disparate narratives and tableaux which the viewer could approach through their personal memories and experiences.

***'Growing Dark'* was derived from a very intuitive way of working. The only luggage or firm idea I brought to this place was my half forgotten memories from childhood. It was a very playful and revitalizing time for me. I somehow felt like a child again; disappearing for hours in the forest, enjoying the smell of the pine trees and feeling enlightened by the beauty of the scenery. I started collecting sticks and various found objects and on return to my studio, (where I also lived) began working with them, putting things on the floor but not really with any firm ideas on where they would go. Eventually I created something which blended my dark, almost faded personal memories with some aspects of the half forgotten history of the site itself.**

***'Growing Dark'* did not only talk about the installed objects, but also about the empty spaces between the objects, filling the room with a certain estranged, melancholic atmosphere. Entering the room you sense this presence, something that could only be created I think, from of the intensity**



Yeb Wiersma, *Fremdarbeit* (2004) (installation view) steel, electric lights.

in which I experienced this space: I lived, worked and slept there.

Yeb's observations and insights during her three-month stay led her to produce a new work exploring a broader collective consciousness. This was based on two German words; *Fremdenzimmer* and *Gastarbeiter*, which held strong connections to the area.

Having worked and lived in this remote place in the Swiss mountains for three months I started to feel very connected. I was not only connected to the landscape surrounding me but also to the other artists living there, the history of the site and to the wider region. I became aware of the sometimes itchy relations between the locals and 'foreigners' (as we artists were called). Although the residency has been operating for 12 years, to the villager's guest artists are still considered the 'strange people' from the valley. With this also brings a sense of freedom and fun because, like the idiots in the Lars Von Trier movie, assumptions are already made and suspicions are high. I wanted to play with this idea and came across two German words, which somehow reflected our complex situation as foreign artists-in-residence.

The first word *'Fremdenzimmer'*, when literally translated into English means *room for strangers*, or put simply, *vacancies* or *rooms available*. The second word *'Gastarbeiter'* means *guest worker* and in the political sense refers to migrants from the Mediterranean who came to both Western Europe (and Australia) in the sixties for work. As long as they remained 'guests' they were welcomed because they worked hard for little money. Later

when they wanted to stay and become citizens with the same rights as everyone else, feelings towards them quickly changed. I think this attitude is very concerning and unfortunately very alive at the moment in Western Europe. It is the thin line of civilisation. As long as one labels foreigners as tourists, it's fine as it equates to making money – but when they turn out to be something else...? So by dividing up these two words into four smaller ones: *Fremd/strange, Gast/guest, Arbeit/work* and *Zimmer/room* they started referring to more than just our situation as an international artist-in-residence.

The outcome was the site-specific public work '*Fremdarbeit*' which was erected on the outside of the spa building in February 2004. Whilst resembling existing commercial signs advertising hotel rooms, '*Fremdarbeit*' differed slightly in that it had a dislocated carnivalesque quality about it. As these four words, stemming from a central vertical post measuring 15 metres high, slowly lit up one letter at a time, the surrounding valley that otherwise would have been engulfed in complete darkness unexpectedly did so too. The radiance surprised even Yeb who had manufactured the work in Amsterdam during late 2003.

The installation had quite a strong impact. First of all I was indeed surprised by the enormous radiation of bulb lights throughout the entire valley, the whole scenery was a strange mixture of art installation and an advertising campaign – an ambiguous work that made you wonder.

Yeb's time residing in Switzerland proved to have a lasting effect on her practice as she continued to explore her urban environment with equal fervor. This has resulted in a quirky photographic project, which portrays an unidentifiable woman disappearing into bushes, garden plots and parklands around Amsterdam. Yeb approached the Amsterdam South City Council for funding with the idea of printing a photo book which is to be published during the summer of 2005.

Returning to Amsterdam, I truly missed the smell of the forest, of real nature. I noticed whenever I was walking through the city I was visibly relieved to enter small parks, bushes or places that simulated nature. Then the idea was born to make this 'longing' visible by literally sticking my head into these small artificial islands of green and trying to refresh, which for me is a perfume for the lungs. I thought this was funny in a way because here again I could see the importance of a certain location on the work and a longing for an authentic experience with nature in an urban environment. The distinction between the 'wild and savage' and the 'constructed' concepts of nature became much more evident and the whole project turned out to be pretty absurd, embracing a kind of slapstick aesthetic.

Yeb continues to benefit from residencies as not simply places to research and work but as sites to stretch boundaries, experiment with process and open oneself to new possibilities. In 2004 as artist-in-residence at Gertrude Contemporary Art Space Yeb worked on a still unfinished series of photographs of people sleeping in public libraries which she began at the Cooper Union Art College in New York in 2001.



Left: Yeb Wiersma, *Photoseries* (2004) photograph (from forthcoming book).

In Melbourne I was struck by the impressive features of the State Library and felt I could continue my series 'Departure' here. What has been interesting for me to discover while observing peoples behaviour in this particular public space, is the ease and safety they felt in allowing themselves to fall asleep. This seems significant as being asleep captures us in our most fragile state because we loose control of our consciousness. It is quite beautiful to think that a library can provide this environment, this comfort. Hopefully I will return to Melbourne in 2006 to exhibit these photographs in the public domain of the library, returning the sleepers from where they came.

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