

The Dream in the Reality in the Dream

The Universe of Saskia Olde Wolbers

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[DAVID STROBAND]

Quite a phenomenon, the oeuvre of Saskia Olde Wolbers (Breda, 1971). The visual artist, who lives and works in London, is extremely well-known in the art world; her work attracts glowing reviews and she has received several prizes for it. To date, though, this has been based on just nine works with a total viewing-time of fifty-seven minutes. Her first work, *The Mary Hay Room*, appeared in 1997; the most recent, *Pareidolia*, in 2011.

Exploring Saskia Olde Wolbers' work is something of an adventure. Her creations could be called visual artworks. Though they are also stories, and also films. But not just films, not just stories. Is that why we call it visual art? In any case, Olde Wolbers received her Bachelor of Visual Arts from the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam and her Master of Fine Arts from the Chelsea College of Art & Design in London, and she exhibits at visual arts institutions.

The first time I saw her work remains etched in my memory. The work was called *Day-Glo* and was on show at the end of 2000 in the exhibition *Mindset* of the Stedelijk Museum Bureau in Amsterdam. Even then this artist occupied a position of her own in the visual arts world. An artist who let image and spoken text communicate so freely with each other, who gave such free reign to the imaginative association between literary and visual forms: such an artist was a novelty ten years ago.

Her images, filled with metallic or plastic objects that emit soft colours and have been dipped in liquid, suggest a story, while the spoken texts or voice-overs evoke strong visual associations. Her early images and texts in particular border on science fiction. You never arrive at a concrete interpretation of these narrative and visual elements, but they don't let go of you either.

My first confrontation with *Day-Glo* brought back memories of the trip through the forbidden zone in Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* (1979). What is shown here is a bare, peculiar world which all real life seems to have fled. In *Stalker*, however, we still have a few characters. In Olde Wolbers' visual world not one is to be seen. Unidentifiable objects float past us in an open and empty universe. There seems to be an infinity of space both inside and outside the frames, but at the same time these worlds have an oppressive look and generate a feeling of claustrophobia. They also evoke associations with the visually stylized worlds of Stanley Kubrick's films from the 1960s and '70s.



Day-Glo, video for projection with sound, 6 minutes (loop), 1999. Courtesy Maureen Paley, London.

Sculptured language

In the above paragraph I put Saskia Olde Wolbers' work in the context of cinema, but that is not really correct. Cinema has a strong tradition of storytelling, a plot that is slowly built up and gets resolved, with images and storyline helping each other out. In Olde Wolbers' work image and voice-over seem at first glance to be at odds with each other. In her English texts, rather monotonously spoken by a male or female voice, a number of characters are introduced. Sometimes it's actors who speak the text, sometimes friends. Often the voice belongs to one of the story's main characters, giving us his or her view of events. Usually the characters are engaged in a battle with life and with themselves. They are victims of unreal events and are imprisoned in certain memories, not knowing whether these are real or imaginary. In fact lies and truth are constantly changing places in these spoken worlds. The voice-over sketches peculiar worlds in which events melt into each other in unpredictable ways. These unfathomable stories are narrated soberly, often in an accent that reveals where the story is taking place.

Art critic Sacha Bronwasser neatly sums up Olde Wolbers' textual world: 'In a language that puts everything so precisely in its place, that is so simple and at the same time so smart - a 'sculptured' language.' The tone of the spoken texts has to be sober because the words mustn't overshadow the images. The tales are fictional, stories that have come into existence after a long period of research. While images and text at first seem to lead parallel lives, they soon become interwoven in your mind. They are in constant contact, in fact, but it is hard to pinpoint exactly how that is. The unreal character of both the literary and the visual components undoubtedly plays a big role here.

It is striking that in the above quotation Sacha Bronwasser uses the term 'sculptured' with reference to the *text*. The visual worlds of Olde Wolbers are also created along traditional lines using a wide range of manual procedures. At first glance these visual constructions seem to have been produced using all kinds of digital techniques, but nothing could be further from the truth. For each work a model is built in the studio where with the help of various materials (vacuum-formed plastic, braided nylon, cod liver oil capsules, shapes



Kilowatt Dynasty, video for projection with sound, 6 min. (loop), 2000. Courtesy Maureen Paley, London.

made from wire and fishing line, lots of paint and glue ...) settings are created. They are mostly placed in a pool of water set up in the studio. Recorded at length by small, mobile digital cameras, we are then shown strange, pleasurable liquid worlds full of slowly pulsating dynamics.

Longing and disillusion

Olde Wolbers does her writing and building in parallel. While she is writing, images will occur to her and she will start constructing them right away. Sometimes she has made objects that only later find their place again in a story. In her fantastic settings, visual worlds between dream and reality, stories reverberate that are full of human tragedy and failings, but also of longing.

Cosmos from 1998 (a five-minute film) tells the story of a Russian woman, trying to snare a rich American husband through a dating agency. Eventually an art gallery owner comes to visit her in her hotel room. Afraid that he will discover that she doesn't know anything about art, the Russian woman decides to make a monumental sculpture out of soap bubbles. The sculpture, which is meant eventually to take the form of the Taj Mahal, grows only slowly and the Russian woman lets the soap do the work for her. The result: the whole hotel gets flooded and in the basement car park a huge ice sculpture is formed. This artwork causes the death of several people, among them the gallery owner. The story is told calmly by a woman's voice. The images show spaces where the ice has taken over the concrete and where in the filtered light pillars of ice and long icicles almost appear to be dancing together.

In *Day-Glo* from 1999 (six minutes) a man with a Spanish accent tells an estate agent of his life full of illusions and loss. He had emigrated from Spain to Australia and there met the love of his life. After a failed business growing vegetables the couple returned to Southern Spain, where they built a number of greenhouses to grow cucumbers and tomatoes in. That too is a disastrous failure and Luis Zarzuela, the narrator, decides to turn his greenhouses into a virtual theme park where emigrants who have recently returned to Spain can soak up the Australian atmos-



Placebo, video for projection with sound, 6 minutes (loop), 2002. Courtesy Maureen Paley, London.

Interloper, video for projection with sound, 6 minutes (loop), 2003. Courtesy Maureen Paley, London.

phere once more. At first he has a lot of visitors, but then nobody comes any more, as people become sad when they are reminded of their failed dreams. Zarzuela wants to close the park, but can't because of one visitor who is spending more and more time wandering round the park: his own wife, who has fallen in love again with his former self. He finds himself obliged to distance himself from her and leave her with her new love: the young Luis Zarzuela. I quote a few sentences from the end of the story:

*But for Carmen our world was a fantasy amplifier.
She loved being in there,
Taking her early morning walks.
I was pleased she loved my creation so much,
Although I was seeing less and less of her.
The morning walks became day walks ...
And then it happened ...
One night she didn't return home at all,
Which to me meant only one thing.
She was having an affair.
I found out she was flirting with her memories of me.
She was having an affair ..
With the Luis she met twenty years ago.
Her visits to the real world became less frequent,
Not returning home for days on end.
One day I said to her, 'Do you want me now or then?'
She moved in with him, away from the present.*

While the story is being told you see a strange landscape with a metallic glow, in which a multitude of small pointed shapes light up and form a rigid pattern. First you move past all kinds of greenish and yellowish branch-like shapes, then a large number of peculiar sculptural forms go by that seem to have been derived from comic books or old science-fiction films. The land-

scape of this Spanish park, surrounded by an impenetrable blackness, is made from a big curved sheet of metal, with plastic shapes on it that are lit from the inside. The whole contraption was put on a record player and rotated by one of Olde Wolbers' acquaintances. The camera recording the whole was hanging on its side.

The above two stories deal with longing, disillusion, even humiliation. Contemporary phenomena such as a virtual theme park or a dating agency are combined with age-old human tendencies. This work also contains some social criticism: in the part of southern Spain where *Day-Glo* is set, human exploitation is rife.

Under water

In *Kilowatt Dynasty* (2000, seven minutes) a woman with a Chinese accent tells about her upcoming birth in 2016. Her mother will be a presenter on a television shopping programme. The television channel, which promotes washing machines among other things, has its studio under water, close to the great Three Gorges Dam in China. The windows behind the presenter look out on old submerged villages (the actual flooding of hundreds of villages was a much disputed act of the Chinese government). The future father of the narrator is an activist protesting against the dam who has chained himself to the gate of the visitors' centre. At a certain moment he storms into the studio and claims straight to camera that he has taken the female presenter hostage. In reality she's not in the studio at all but wandering around above water in the newly built city on the shores of the reservoir. Then, inexplicably, she is suddenly in the studio after all and reiterates the demand of the hostage-taker. This last element puzzles the not-yet-born narrator. She suspects that her mother has fallen victim to inverted dream syndrome. Because of the great emptiness of the underwater studio and the whole reservoir she is confusing dream and reality. Astronauts often seem to suffer from this syndrome, thinking that their families at home are the reality of that moment and that their space-flight is a dream. This kind of inversion of dream and reality is typical of Olde Wolbers' work.

The spoken text is backed by Chinese gongs and all kinds of electronic sound effects. In *Kilowatt Dynasty* even the images give you little to hold on to. In the beginning the camera glides across water and comes to a lot of little islands made of plastic cylinders and funnels. The camera slips down into one of them and we find ourselves in a magical, weightless, liquid world with soft green lighting. At one point the camera moves between undulating, snake-like forms, made from copper wire braided to look like fish scales. Masses of plastic packaging materials and Italian plastic oil bottles have also been used in this film.

Olde Wolbers loves making things and using different techniques. She is always trying out new procedures. For *Kilowatt Dynasty* she still used a tiny bath standing on a transparent table of synthetic material. The virtually weightless set moved around the camera, which was encased in a kind of bubble. As there were also lamps hanging above the water, it was a risky undertaking. Since then her sets have become more professional. The tiny bath, for example, has been replaced by a big water tank and it's no longer friends and acquaintances who keep her sets moving. And she now orders motorized cameras from a specialist company that will make a special dolly, a little wagon on which the

Trailer, video for projection with sound, 10 minutes (loop), 2005 Courtesy Maureen Paley, London.



camera can ride. Olde Wolbers creates her work on miniature sets, so she also needs small-scale equipment.

The works *Placebo* (2001, six minutes) and *Interloper* (2003, six minutes) are independent of each other, but both are inspired by the true story of the fake French doctor Jean-Claude Romand. For years he made everyone around him believe he was a doctor. When, in the early 1990s he began to suspect that people were on to him, he killed his wife, his two children and himself. *Placebo* and *Interloper* don't actually tell the story of this fake doctor; there is already a feature film that does that. These works create a magical, somewhat sinister atmosphere around such human feelings as longing, surprise and belief. The visual landscape in *Placebo* has been created out of hamster cages with hospital furniture made out of wire inside them. 'Those models were dipped in paint and then filmed under water. The paint, that hangs down like skins from the wire and doesn't mix with the water, attracts bubbles and froth. The walls flutter, the empty rooms look like a living organism out of a nightmare', so Sacha Bronwasser writes.

Red cinema, green jungle

Olde Wolbers' main interest is in literature, more than in visual art. She likes Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Michel Tournier, David Mitchell, Marcel Proust, Oliver Sachs and Haruki Murakami. But visual art gives her the opportunity to position herself between literature and film. This way she doesn't have to compete with either discipline.

Trailer (2005, ten minutes) is the result of two investigations by Olde Wolbers. She lived for some time in Los Angeles and there became interested in its old, somewhat dilapidated movie houses and also in Kinemacolor, an old technique that used rotating red and green filters to colour black-and-white films. *Trailer* is made up of green images of a jungle and red impressions of the auditorium and foyer of an old cinema. The story arose from her reading

of a news item about a love affair between the Hollywood stars Clark Gable and Loretta Young. It resulted in a child, Judy Lewis, who was told throughout her life that she had been adopted by her mother. Lewis did not discover the truth until she was an old woman and so could only admire her parents on screen. The narrator of *Trailer* is Alfgar Dalio. While watching an old movie trailer, he notices that he shares his name with a moth, a parasite that lives in the Amazon jungle. From his father he learns that he is adopted and a product of Hollywood's glamour years. The story also features two actors who played small roles in the 1930s, Ring Kittle and Elmore Vella. Dalio decides to watch all their old films at a cinema. The images seem familiar and give him a warm feeling. He goes to the old woman at the box-office and asks for information. She turns out to know everything about Kittle and Vella. While flying over the Amazon for their first film in Kinemacolor, they had crashed. Through this a hallucinogenic plant, the Coxocotl, was reanimated and named after Vella. The only enemy of this plant was the moth Alfgar Dalio. The couple lived among the plants for some time and were completely forgotten by the film world. Their films were not issued in Kinemacolor and were therefore dated. In a last attempt to achieve some renown they had set up a cinema that showed many of their films. In black-and-white only.

I quote the beautiful start of the story: 'Somewhere in the vast Amazonian forest ... among plants whose indigenous, Spanish and Latin names ... compete with one another outside of their awareness.' The camera very leisurely explores the sparkling red interior of the cinema and the watery green of the jungle. Slowly the story unfolds with all its amazing disclosures, both visual and spoken.

Above water

In *Deadline* (2007, eighteen minutes) a woman, Salingding, recounts fragments of traditional stories from a fishing village in Gambia. She does so during a sixteen-month journey in a primitive vehicle (which has the word 'Deadline' on it) from Gambia to Nigeria, where she has to catch a plane. Mythical stories about the snake Ninki Nanka and a confused grandmother play a part here. At the airport at the end of the story Salingding sees a stranger who is holding a book that has on its cover a photo of the vehicle 'Deadline'. The images show a strange, round rabbit made out of fishing line and filled with a mobile yellow fluid that seems to be slowly dripping from its extremely long ears. The fluid defies gravity and moves from bottom to top. Meanwhile the camera wanders slowly between oval stone shapes that evoke associations with modernist African architecture. It also follows the movements of two silver-coloured snakes. Alongside the text you hear soft African drumming.

In this work there is a difference in the experience of time between image and text: the narrator talks rather quickly of all kinds of traditions and events, while the images move very slowly. In this way image and text interact even more intensively.

According to Sacha Bronwasser, whom I quoted earlier, *Deadline* is more rooted in reality than the earlier works. On a trip through Africa Olde Wolbers took many photographs of modernist African architecture of the 1970s. Motifs from these photos can be seen in the film. In an interview the artist said that

her main character Salingding could be carrying those photos with her. Africa has an exceptionally rich oral culture and Olde Wolbers has made use of that too; for instance, she heard a story about a taxi driver who had driven through eight different countries to catch a plane. *Deadline* is also the first work that to a great extent was not filmed under water.

Zen and archery

At the beginning of 2011 Olde Wolbers told Sacha Bronwasser: 'For a year and a half I've been working on a robot and now it's finished. It is a bird that can spread its wings and move its head. It's a kind of puppetry. It is a very simple robot, but it looks very good. It is made from Nitinol, a kind of wire that has 'memory' and reverts to a certain form.'

This creation can be admired in *Pareidolia* (2011, twelve minutes), that had its premiere at *A Shot in the Dark*, a retrospective of Olde Wolbers' work at the Secession arts centre in Vienna. The 'movable' bird plays a part in it, together with a fictional story about a Japanese archer in the 1920s. In his book *Zen and the Art of Archery* the German professor Eugen Herrigel uses an eye-witness report about the Japanese archery master, Awa Kenzo, who shot two arrows in complete darkness. The amazing thing was that the second arrow split the first. Kenzo attributed this to external, even spiritual powers that had taken possession of him at the time. Herrigel's description of traditional Japanese archery and the spiritually-coloured interpretation of it contributed to the greatly increased awareness of Zen Buddhism in the western world in the mid-20th century.

The title *Pareidolia* refers to a psychological phenomenon, a form of illusion in which people attribute specific meanings to vague, arbitrary observations. In this work Olde Wolbers shows again how she remains fascinated by the impossibility of a clear divide between reality and imagination. In the end not even the scientific gloss of a publication by a German professor can hide the fact that his conclusions are based on vague assumptions. In this work, with its very specific title, Saskia Olde Wolbers seems to be pointing to the highly subjective content of historic tales. They are rarely based solely on objective research or on pure fiction, but float somewhere between the two and remain caught in illusion or confusion.

The interesting thing about Olde Wolbers' work is that for her this conclusion isn't so much a goal as a means. That is what keeps her work alive. ■

FURTHER READING

Stijn huijts, Gianni Jetzer, Patricia Ellis, Saskia Olde Wolbers: *now that part of me has become fiction*, Artimo Amsterdam, 2003

Rainald Schumacher, *Saskia Olde Wolbers*, sammlung goetz, Munchen 2010

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Deadline, video for projection with sound (loop), 18 minutes, 2007. Courtesy Maureen Paley, London.