

Film as a Reflexive Medium and a Productive Space

The Artist Wendelien van Oldenborgh

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[M I R J A M W E S T E N]

'In the Netherlands, with its open and democratic society, inconvenient voices are cut short by the way other voices in society react to them.'

Katerina Gregos (2011)¹

Wendelien van Oldenborgh (Rotterdam, b. 1962) has since 2000 been making her mark with remarkable film and slide installations in which she touches on topics concerning social relations, migration, racism and gender. Often these are 'neglected' topics from the past, lying dormant just below the surface of the present. One subject that has received her particular attention since 2005 is the influence of the Netherlands' colonial past on the present and on the self-image of the Dutch. With such film installations as *Mauritsscript* (2006), *No false echoes* (2008), *Instruction* (2009) and *La Javanaise* (2012), she is one of the few artists to have contributed to the 'faltering post-colonial discourse' in the 'colour-blind' Netherlands.²

Her film oeuvre is characterised by its considerable discursiveness: we see participants in conversation with each other, reading out a text or making music together. What is important is that no one single voice predominates. The artist is concerned with polyphony, enabling the different voices to be heard alongside one another. One of the essential principles of her method is the interaction between the invited participants, who sometimes hardly know each other nor have previously practised together, and their collaboration with the artist. Van Oldenborgh does not see herself as a director; she rarely uses a written script, does not give any directions, and at most steers them a little this way or that. She brings the people together, and what they say depends on who they are, whether young or old, black or white, individual or group, with all their different backgrounds. Sometimes she asks them to read out particular historical texts, after which they discuss the content. Though what is to be recited or discussed is considered on the basis of specific questions before filming. The participants do not play a particular role, but play themselves, and their dialogue unfolds on the spot. Van Oldenborgh aims to create a sort of 'aliveness', where the camera functions as a catalyst in these live moments. Everything is moving all the time and can be adjusted as it goes along; differences of opinion are heard and explored. Using the film medium, Van Oldenborgh creates an ac-



Wendelien van Oldenborgh,
2017. Photo by Ari Versluis

tive space that is built up by means of sound, text, image and recognition, and with which she 'enables visible and invisible connections between historical expositions and contemporary reality to unfold'.³ According to the art historian Sven Lütticken, the way the participants play themselves 'not only makes history as tangible as the nagging tragedy of modernity, but also allows possible alternative histories and unwritten futures to show through.'⁴ By means of the conversations between the participants, Van Oldenborgh creates a new view of the past, and thereby of the present, without otherwise drawing any conclusions.

Other voices on 'Dutch Tolerance'

In 2017, she exhibited three lenticular photographic works and two video installations under the title *Cinema Olanda* in the Dutch Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The two-part *Prologue: Squat/Anti-Squat* (2016) consists of two films shot in the Tripolis office building designed by Hannie and Aldo van Eyck and built in South Amsterdam in 1994. In this diptych we see people of different generations talking to each other about their involvement in the Surinamese-Antillean activist movement, which in the 1970s organised squats on the Bijlmer housing estate and exposed the housing policy concerning Surinamese

and Antillean people who moved to the Netherlands. The former activists talk to youngsters who were involved in the recent squatting campaign by the asylum-seekers' 'We Are Here' movement. *Prologue: Squat/Anti-Squat* is 'fuelled' by information from the *Vereniging Ons Suriname* (Association for Our Surinam) and by several archives at the International Institute of Social History. Her latest film, also titled *Cinema Olanda* (2017) was inspired by histories to be found in 'The Black Archives', a collection of documents on black history and culture in and outside the Netherlands.⁵

In their presentation in Venice, Van Oldenborgh and the curator Lucy Cotter wanted to shed a different light on the Netherlands. The rational, clear and transparent look of the 1953 pavilion designed by Gerrit Rietveld (acclaimed as the 'triumph of modernism') contributed to the image of the post-war Netherlands as a country of transparency, openness and progress. They adjust this image, which the Netherlands actively propagates, by bringing 'other voices' to the fore to expose a less rose-tinted side of the Netherlands' so-called progressive post-war modernity: the exclusion of 'newcomers' from Indonesia and Surinam and the distrust of socialist and communist movements which in the preceding decades had been closely interwoven with the ideals of the avant-garde.

Although Van Oldenborgh's work was until recently largely given a positive reception in art and opinion magazines and newspapers, the presentation in the Giardini was very critically received in the Netherlands, with the exception of the weekly paper *De Groene Amsterdammer*.⁶ According to the art critic Rutger Pontzen, the artist is overestimating her own powers, and the film *Cinema Olanda* does not work at all. He condescendingly dismisses Van Oldenborgh and Cotter as '*Gutmenschen*'. His most serious complaint is that this latest film contains too much information – enough for five episodes of the TV series *Andere Tijden* (Other Times) – so that the intentions float around like 'loose scraps of ideas' in a 'revolting noncommittalism'.⁷ Hilda Bouma characterises Van Oldenborgh's films as incomprehensible to the average Biennale visitor, but does give the artist 'marks for her good intentions', because she 'corrects the image of the renowned Dutch tolerance'.⁸

Unlike the foreign press, the reactions in the Netherlands were so disparaging that the young Dutch writer Frank Keizer published an open declaration of support in the online periodical *Rekto:Verso*. He accused Dutch art critics of taking a long detour around post-colonial history.⁹ Although in general I endorse this, I nevertheless wonder whether this really is the crux of the matter. Is the criticism a consequence of a lack of familiarity with the stories, and out of irritation because it is not made immediately clear what we are watching? Is it because of the way of filming? Or 'did we Dutch not recognise ourselves' and 'did we look into a white mirror and see black nonsense'? as Roos van Lint, art editor of *De Groene Amsterdammer* wondered. Whatever the answer is to these questions, it is a fact that *Cinema Olanda* is indeed fuelled by a large amount of information and topics which, in contrast to all Van Oldenborgh's previous works, do not unfold *in relation to each other* from the beginning, but seem more likely to have been simply threaded together. The film raises a great many questions and discussions that touch on the complexity and stratification of modernity and the formation of images and which, indeed, cannot be grasped in the blink of an eye. What are these stories?

I do not need my freedom when I am dead

Cinema Olanda was shot in a single take and is set near Sint Bavo, the modernist church in the post-war district of Pendrecht in Rotterdam.¹⁰ Even before we see a single image, we hear a conversation about the German-Dutch architect Lotte Stam-Beese (1903-1988) who designed this district. She was one of a generation of architects who combined *Nieuwe Bouwen* ('New Building') with social awareness and was active in movements that opposed fascism. In the 1930s she was involved in the construction of towns and cities in the Soviet Union and, as an urban development architect, played a major role in the reconstruction in and around the city of Rotterdam after the Second World War. Then a young black man (Mitchell Esajas)¹¹ appears on the screen, standing on the constructivist spiral staircase in the detached belfry of the church, and reads from the biography of the Surinamese-Dutch political activist Otto Huiswoud (Paramaribo, 1893 – Amsterdam, 1961). Huiswoud was a co-founder and the first black member of the Communist Party in America. Through their international contacts, he and his wife Hermine Dumont (1905-1998) were pivotal in anti-colonial movements. They contributed to the international magazine *The Negro Worker*.¹² In 1949 they settled in Amsterdam, where Huiswoud became the chairman of the *Vereniging Ons Suriname* (Association for Our Surinam).¹³ The camera then moves from the belfry to a number of women standing at the side of the church: cultural historian Hanneke Oosterhof, cultural anthropologist Lizzy van Leeuwen and historian Maria Cijntje-van Enckevort. They are talking about the Indonesian migrants who came to the Netherlands after the Second World War.¹⁴ When the young man joins them, they ask him whether he too would become a member of an international revolutionary movement. Together with a group of parishioners consisting mainly of local Antillean, Syrian and African residents, the group goes inside the church, where their conversation is drowned out by an indo-rock number by the guitarists Lode Simons and Remy Sonnevill.¹⁵ The camera then zooms in on a conversation about well-known freedom fighters and writers with whom Otto and Hermine had been in



Wendelien van Oldenborgh,
Cinema Olanda (film still), 2017



Wendelien van Oldenborgh,
Cinema Olanda (production image), 2017

contact. At the end of the fifteen-minute film, a woman (the Surinamese-Dutch artist Patrician Kaersenhout) reads out a text by the American poet Langston Hughes (1902-1967), who played a major part in the literary 'Harlem Renaissance' movement and who was a friend of the Huiswoud: 'I do not need my freedom when I am dead / I cannot live on tomorrow's bread // Freedom / Is a strong seed / Planted / In a great need // I live here too / I want freedom / Just as you.' Immediately after this, the local teenage band Addiction plays 'Labels', a number written specially for *Cinema Olanda*, which is about the way we dismiss others by 'labelling' them. As the credits begin, we hear Kaersenhout's voice continuing; the 'black struggle' always felt like someone else's history, until she heard about Huiswoud. She wonders how it is possible that she had never previously heard of the Surinamese-Dutch Huiswoud, while other Afro-Caribbean freedom fighters with whom he was in contact are still known today and play a part in the post-colonial debate. It is only when she poses this question that it suddenly occurs to me as I watch the film what the effect is of history written from a particular point of view, and which stories are out of place in the image of the open, tolerant and modern state that the Netherlands has made itself out to be – not only during the reconstruction period, but also in the present day. I was touched above all by the tone of her voice, in which sincere amazement and regret can be heard. And it was this that persuaded me of the power of *Cinema Olanda*. All at once, the various stories fit together like parts of a puzzle.



Wendelien van Oldenborgh, installation views from *Cinema Olanda*, 2017



Wendelien van Oldenborgh, installation views from *Cinema Olanda*, 2017

Slowness challenges the Netflix view

In an interview published in the voluminous publication *Amateur* (2016), Van Oldenborgh commented that she finds it nice 'to see that, outside their immediate context, certain topics are able to bring about something rich and full – that it is not necessarily about others, but that after seeing the work you can actually conclude, we now know something more about ourselves'.¹⁶

The artist does not make it easy for the viewer, however. It is typical of her filmmaking strategy: she does not present unambiguous storylines that are simple to follow. There is no traditional development with a clear beginning, climax or final conclusion with which you may or may not agree. There is no sign of a single leading actor, as the participants are all protagonists. Van Oldenborgh deliberately frustrates the viewer's desire to identify with or latch onto a single story; she presents numerous stories in parallel, letting them jump about in time, and all these elements are equally important. She also makes it hard for us to identify with the participants; they read something out and comment on it on the spot, so that there is a degree of alienation. This effect is increased by her frequent tendency to film from an annoyingly long distance; if she does zoom in, she rarely shows the whole face. And while I make an effort to listen to their voices I am quite regularly distracted by the movement of the camera, which wanders around and focusses on an insignificant detail of the wall, floor or staircase. I invariably wonder whether this has some meaning or is a matter of carelessness. In any case, the slowness of the images challenges the perverted Netflix view that is used to a change of image every three seconds. I find it hard to watch with concentration for a long time.



Mauritsscript, 2006. Stills from the video installation

Courtesy Wilfrid Lenz Rotterdam and the artist

Those who are speaking do not look straight at me, the viewer, and do not speak to me, but to each other. Yet I still feel as if I am being spoken to. I don't fully understand how this swing takes place, from the initial feeling of being kept at a distance to something that 'resounds' inside me. Van Oldenborgh has developed an ingenious way of making the viewer a partner in the process in which the participants are not directed, but give themselves the room to ask themselves and others questions and make connections between the past and pressing issues of the day, on the basis of their own knowledge and experience, and with all their hesitations and moments of silence.

Since 2005, Van Oldenborgh has made sixteen installations using this film-based approach.¹⁷ The locations are also significant: the room, the building, the architecture – as in the case of Rietveld's pavilion in *Cinema Olanda* – are symbolic and sometimes form a historical reference. For instance, the filming for the installation *Mauritsscript* (2006), which is about the legacy of seventeenth-century colonial history, took place in the Mauritshuis in The Hague. Johan Maurits van Nassau had this 'Sugar Palace' built during his governorship of Brazil (1637-1644), with the money he earned 'off the backs of the enslaved Africans'.¹⁸ The film material for the installation *Beauty and the Right to the Ugly* (2014), on the ideals and limits of the shapeable society, was shot in 't Karregat, a multipurpose community centre in Eindhoven which in the 1970s raised eyebrows with its large open space without walls. According to its architect, Van Klinger, its users had to 'unclump'.

One factor in her oeuvre that is quite significant is the way she not only involves people of different cultural backgrounds in her work, but also brings together people of different ages to look back at history. One of the most moving films in this regard is *Instruction* (2009). We see four young soldiers during their training in a classroom at the Royal Military Academy modestly reading out texts relating to the violent 'politieonele acties' (police actions) with which the Netherlands tried to prevent the independence of its former colony in 1946-1949. When the cadets then discuss the political and military analyses, a 1969 television script, the memoirs of Captain Westerling and a 1981 travel report by Van Oldenborgh's mother, their struggle with such questions as the moral role of the individual and taking the law into one's own hands suddenly comes very close to home.

Ethics of difference

A major source of inspiration for Van Oldenborgh during her studies at Goldsmiths College in London was the South African-British theorist and curator Sarat Maharaj, who, with his 'ethics of difference', offered alternatives to the Eurocentric approach to art history. These 'ethics of difference', which he defines as 'the struggle to construct meaning together, across the border of cultural difference' can be traced as an important thread in Van Oldenborgh's oeuvre.¹⁹ The urgency of the issues she broaches is already apparent from the furore that arose around the programme 'Cinema Olanda: Platform' that was held at the Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art in summer 2017. A group of artists, activists and academics accused the arts centre of showing off in its discussion of decolonisation while its policy remained essentially the same: 'White institutions fortify themselves through the consumption of Blackness. Black people pass through them, seemingly without transforming them – they extract what they need from us to sustain their "criticality"'. In an open letter to the arts centre they also demand that it change its name: Witte Corneliszoon de With, often described as a 'hero of the seas' in the history books, was among other things involved in the siege of Jakarta (1618) and the plundering of the Moluccas.²⁰

It looks as if the post-colonial debate in the Netherlands is now truly stepping up a gear and I expect it to become more intense, thanks in part to Van Oldenborgh.²¹ ■



La Javanaise, 2012. Production still by Barbara Wagner
Courtesy Wilfried Lenz Rotterdam and the artist

NOTES

- 1 Speech Matters. Catalogue of the Danish Pavilion, 2011 Venice Biennale, p. 80.
- 2 Lizzy van Leeuwen, 'Voor wie het wil zien. Over de nationale herrijzenis en de Indische intocht'. *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 9 May 2017. Supplement to Vol. 141, No. 19, Cinema Olanda.
- 3 Interview in *Metropolis M*, issue 3, 2017.
- 4 *Amateur*, p. 45.
- 5 Delano Veira, director of *Vereniging Ons Suriname* at Amsterdam shared a lot of information. The artist also consulted archives at the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, such as Cineclub Vrijheidsfilms, LOSON and the 'Staatsarchief' (squat movement). 'The Black Archives' are an initiative by Jessica de Abreu, Mitchell Esajas and Miguel Heilbron. Their intention is to document and conserve the history of black emancipation movements and individuals in the Netherlands and make them visible and accessible to the public. The archives are housed in the building of the *Vereniging Ons Suriname* in Amsterdam.
- 6 This weekly is the media partner for the 'Cinema Olanda' project and was commissioned by the Mondriaanfonds to publish a special supplement on the Dutch entry on 11 May 2017.
- 7 Rutger Pontzen, 'Pijnlijk: Van Oldenborgh overschat zichzelf op Biënnale Venetië'. *De Volkskrant*, 10 May 2017. The 'Gutmensch' not only wants to do good, but also wants to be known for doing it.
- 8 *Het Financieele dagblad*, 25 May 2017. The Mondriaanfonds compares a number of reviews that appeared in Dutch publications with foreign newspapers. <https://www.mondriaanfonds.nl/2017/06/13/reacties-op-cinema-olanda/>
- 9 Available at: <https://www.rektoverso.be/artikel/beste-wendelien-van-oldenborgh>
- 10 The church was designed by H.N.M. Nefkens and was first used in 1960. Its construction is exceptional: the roof is supported by a structure of seven curved concrete ribs. The south wall consists of colourful glass-in-concrete by Bob Zijlmans.
- 11 Mitchell Esajas works at the University of Amsterdam and is a co-founder of the youth platform *New Urban Collective* and of The Black Archives.
- 12 As from 1930, the magazine *The Negro Worker* (1928-37) was financed by the *International Trade Union Committee for Black Workers*, an international communist organisation.
- 13 Huiswoud played an important part in the *Vereniging Ons Suriname*. He agitated vehemently against the Dutch policy on the independence of Surinam and invited influential Afro-American human rights activists to a talk in Amsterdam, including W.E.B. Du Bois. The esteem in which Huiswoud was held was still apparent years after his death; in Surinamese and communist circles in 1988, the 95th anniversary of his birth was commemorated with all sorts of activities. *De Waarheid*, 5 November 1988.
- 14 Oosterhof is engaged in doctoral research into Lotte Stam-Beese; Van Leeuwen is an expert in the position of Indian Dutch people in the post-colonial era; Cijntje-van Enckewort is doing her PhD on Huiswoud.
- 15 Indo-rock is mainly instrumental rock-'n-roll, performed by musicians from the former Dutch Indies. It provided the foundations for 'nederpop'.
- 16 *Amateur*, Frédérique Bergholtz, p. 368.
- 17 For her method, see: <http://www.acertainbrazilianness.net/htmlpages/introduction.html#method>.
- 18 When the Mauritshuis in The Hague reopened in 2014, it was followed in the online history magazine *Historiek* by a polemic between Zihni Özdil (lecturer at the Erasmus University) and Piet Emmer (Emeritus Professor of the History of European Expansion). Özdil criticised the omission of the Mauritshuis's historical connections with slavery on its official website and in its educational material. According to him, this history had also been 'pasteurised out of existence' in all the reports on the renovation of the Mauritshuis. According to Piet Emmer, Özdil wants to 'criticise the past by means of the values and standards of the present, and his aims seem not to extend further than that.' And:

‘Özdil completely ignores the useful effect of what he sees as Johan Maurits’s exorbitant lifestyle. Because, by taking countless artists and scholars to his colony, Dutch Brazil became the most studied and most illustrated exotic region of the seventeenth century. Botanists, ornithologists, historians and art historians if not more scientists are still reaping the fruit of this, while The Hague was enriched with a superb mansion, which is for that matter of very modest size by foreign standards.’ <http://historiek.net/het-slavernijverleden-van-het-mauritshuis/44119/>. Emmer did not deal with Özdil’s core criticism that the museum had deliberately erased this history of slavery. Özdil reacted to this in <http://historiek.net/de-drogredeneringen-van-piet-emmer/44146/>.

The Mauritshuis took this criticism seriously: on its website, there is now a reference to the historical connection with slavery dated 2/7/2017, at <https://www.mauritshuis.nl/nl-nl/ontdek/mauritshuis/slavernij/>. Under the heading ‘history of the building’, we read this: ‘Some people also mockingly referred to the Mauritshuis as the “Sugar Palace”. This was a reference not only to its light-coloured stone facades, but also to the source of Johan Maurits’s income. In Brazil, he earned a lot of money for the West Indian Company, and for himself, through the trade in cane sugar. Its production was made possible by the use of enslaved men and women from Africa. So Johan Maurits was able to build his house in The Hague not only due to cane sugar, but also due to slavery.’

19 *Amateur*, p. 331.

20 http://www.metropolism.com/nl/news/31933_open_letter_to_witte_de_with. This arts centre thinks that a new name would clean up the link with the past, while it is precisely discussion of the topic that is so important. Since then, the website has given information on its role in colonial history under the heading ‘Disclosure: Witte Corneliszoon de With’. http://www.wdw.nl/nl/pages/acknowledgement_witte_orneliszoon_de_with.

21 But, as she emphasised in the conversation dated 25 April 2017, she is not speaking on behalf of ‘others’.

Translated by Gregory Ball

