

Touching from a distance

Evelyne Coussens

United Planets resides in a former silkscreen-printing place in Ledeberg. Under the direction of artist Karl Van Welden, people are working on a performative cycle that takes as its point of departure: human presence in the universe. Each planet stands for another series of projects; for each performance there is an appropriate form of expression sought, along with a location and a team. To date the following projects have been initiated: MERCURIUS, a series that takes place at old industrial sites, and PLUTO, in which each time only one spectator enters a closed box. The INTRO of PLUTO (PLUTO I) produces a grim picture of mankind as an ambitious being, untouchable in his loneliness.

INTRO | PLUTO is a presentation of twenty minutes, which takes place in a closed wooden box accessible to only one spectator. [1] The strict limitations of the spatial framing stand in sharp contrast with the location of INTRO | MERCURIUS. The INTRO of the first planet series is situated in a deserted hangar, where a group of people, like an escaped cloud of gas, endeavours to take-up the largest possible space. Swarming about, they occupy a magnificent, newly reclaimed territory. The colonisation of a new planet, or a leap back in the history of their own civilisation? Did these people just arrive for the first time, or are they coming home? In any case, their kaffuffle with bricks proves that they had in mind the construction of a new life.

INTRO | PLUTO seems to have made a leap of an indefinite number of years, to a time when our glorious, established civilisation has all been reduced to a heap of rubble and the terrain that was so easily taken into possession has shrunk to the size of a confined wooden box. Confined is also the view on display of the remains of civilisation: through such a narrow slit in the spectator box, the spectator can barely follow what is happening inside the performance box. It is an extremely exaggerated use of the old 'picture frame' in traditional theatres that restricted the spectator's eye to what the director wished him to see. In INTRO | PLUTO the spectator also receives headphones, which exclude every auditive distraction and complete the isolation. One thing is clear: Karl Van Welden demands our full attention for what takes place in his box.

In da box

In the performance box it is as dark as night for a long time. Only slowly are people and things produced from their contours. We see a banal kitchen, one in which a disaster must have just taken place, judging by the floor full of glowing coals. A woman stands stiffly next to the counter, a man apathetically sets right the fallen table and chairs. Foolishly the figures fumble about, as if in shock. Their simple gestures are carried-out in slow motion, cosmic rumble resounds in the headphones. The eternal drone of a Milky Way in motion? The blaring soundtrack of a *Götterdämmerung* only just passed?

The man hoists the woman up onto the counter and washes her feet. Suddenly the space contains a third inhabitant, who sluggishly grapples along the wall. This newcomer shuffles to the counter and opens the kitchen cupboards – they are filled to bursting with canned foods. He stares at the canned foods. He stares at the woman on the counter, and then at the first man, who looks back sternly. Here is a battle without words.

The man steadily makes his way to the table and sits down. In the arm wrestling match that ensues, the newcomer is destined to get the worst of it. The winner washes his hands and closes the cupboard doors. Everything is now officially his: his food, his wife. He spits on his rival. The challenger springs to his feet, knocks over the table and chairs. We hear the noise of flames – the apocalypse commences, once again. The woman takes her original position next to the counter. *Da capo*, for the identical scene.

I look, they are

Ever since contemporary theatre broke open the proscenium arch, the de-theatricalization of the actions on stage have been more the rule than the exception. Many one-on-one shows (CREW/ Eric Joris, Ontroerend Goed) are an enforced form of this de-theatricalization: they aim to make theatre and experience one, reviving such a high level of interactivity that the difference between theatre and life becomes vague or even fades away. INTRO | PLUTO is different. The show not

only keeps the spectator at a distance physically but also obliges him to remain part of the theatricality. Peter Verhelst achieves that through the extreme slowness of his staging, Lotte van den Berg deals with extreme smallness. Karl Van Welden literally retains our gaze by letting us look within a well-determined frame. With INTRO | PLUTO watching is so compelling that it almost becomes creative: without the focus of the spectator the performers do not exist. *I look, so that they will exist.*

However big the universe is, Van Welden directs our gaze to the small: a microscopic power struggle that takes place between three nameless figures. Nevertheless, through the absence of time (or, better: the cyclical repetition thereof) the scene becomes exemplary for the individual. It is as though we meet after the bomb has fallen. The kitchen has the appearance of a fall-out shelter: through the slots in the cupboards, stuffed with food, there still glimmers a (nuclear?) glow. The three are abruptly thrown back into the underworld, or at least into a part thereof: the nameless lowland without hope or fear, where the banal, average ghost – neither the perpetrator nor the blissful – forever remains wandering about. They are trapped in this universe, in this solar system, on this earth, in this fall-out shelter. Victims of themselves and of each other.

In INTRO | PLUTO the underworld is perhaps not only a physical cell, but also a state of mind. Even in these abominable circumstances, or maybe determined there, humanity vanishes and the only thing that still applies is the Animal Law of the strongest. With the rubble of civilisation underfoot, the nature of the human beast rises to the top. The return to the pecking order of animals is linked with struggle: the strongest wins and humiliates the weakest, in order to take what he needs. Enclosed and imprisoned with the same sort, man recreates intimacy and intimidation, harmony and loneliness. The fierce flames that conclude the scene and the circular structure of the stage-set, foretell the endless repetition of this evil. Mankind is the greatest disaster for mankind – Sophocles and Sartre already knew that. Van Welden also holds a mirror in front of us. The face that we see in it is distorted and the teeth are bared.

Desolation

The Roman god Pluto, a Chthonier, was exiled to an underground kingdom by his heavenly colleagues. In turn, the planet Pluto also fell into exile: in 2006 the heavenly body was officially deleted from the row of fully-fledged planets and degraded to a 'dwarf planet'. No wonder thus, that in INTRO | PLUTO 'desolation' also plays an important role. Still, the *leitmotiv* reaches farther than the content of the narrative. The performers play 'blind', against an empty wall, deprived of any contact with the spectator. The spectator is in turn completely alone. The spectator box isolates him from the action but at the same time offers him the possibility to come closer, as an anonymous voyeur. That makes him a 'chosen one', but untouchable. The spectator in INTRO | PLUTO is a privileged but lonely witness.

I think it was Dante who described hell as "proximity without intimacy". The singer Ian Curtis, who died prematurely, expressed that same feeling as "touching from a distance". Van Welden creates such a hell. Despite the small space in which the characters from INTRO | PLUTO find themselves, there is no human contact between them – it is everyone for himself. And the spectator cannot do anything but look-on helplessly. Where other individual performances are often aimed at creating intimacy, Van Welden does the pole opposite. He lets us come very near, in order for us to then feel more sharply just how faraway we actually are.

Publication: Corpus Kunstkritiek - VTI, 2009

Translated by Jodie Hruby

Viewed on 21 March 2009 in Atelier 30, Ghent (Ledeberg), Belgium

[1] *INTRO/ II. PLUTO originally made up part of the development of the multimedia project Boxes. For Boxes, United Planets invited a number of artists of different disciplines to offer an answer to the question regarding the relationship between the small man and the enormity of the universe, and to do so inside a wooden box, using their own chosen medium.*