

Until I See Your Dreams In Dark Skies: About Spaces and Intentions, Bodies Real and Virtual

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ABSTRACT

This visual essay and accompanying text explores the work of the Belgian assemblage artist Camiel Van Breedam through a series of dialogues: between Van Breedam's personal archive of waste material, and the works that he has shaped out of it; through the very different works that Remco Roes has himself made using that same archive; through the relationship between the two-dimensional images that make up the visual essay, and the complex three-dimensional spaces they seek both to articulate and to conceal; and through the ensuing conversation between Roes and Peter Snowden, which itself simultaneously explicates, complicates, revises and evades the visual modes of knowledge developed by the images. In this dialogue, it is suggested that none of these spaces – whether tactile, visual or verbal – can exist apart from the particular bodies that engage them as their "sole locus of reference," and that the dark space where the raw, fragmentary material is collected and conserved is never exhausted by the emergent work, but persists and insists as its ground and its condition. The result is not a commentary or an analysis, in images or in words, but a form of resonance between interiority as a sensory practice, and the exposed surfaces of the always-provisional artistic work.

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p.24-25 (buildings), p.27 (top right), p.38 (left): © Camiel Van Breedam

p.26 (left), p.38 (right): © Roland Minnaert

p.28-29 + p.36-37 (models): © Didier Verriest

p.40 (bottom left): © IFFM, leper







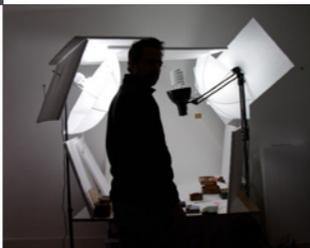
















UNTIL I SEE YOUR DREAM IN DARK SKIES ABOUT SPACES AND INTENTIONS, BODIES REAL AND VIRTUAL

Peter Snowdon: Looking at the images laid out in your visual essay, I am struck by the ways in which they not only articulate, but also dramatise the multiple spaces they explore.¹ There are Camiel Van Breedam's storerooms and his workspace, of course, but also other associated spaces outside, and within, that ordinary space. These include the spaces of his finished works, and of their exhibition; the spaces nested within, or denied by, the objects which make up those works; the spaces you have yourself created through and around objects drawn from that same 'archive,' in a series of works in which you repurpose and reconfigure his collection; and then there is a series of spaces which might appear — but which may well not be — 'secondary,' because they are mediated through another part of Camiel's collection, namely, the photographs he has taken or gathered over the years.²

These photographs record not only past dimensions of his own creative work, but also traces and aspects of his passage through a larger world — spaces he has traversed, reworked, even inhabited, on the one hand; and on the other, spaces he seems to have deliberately chosen not to investigate or inquire into, but which instead he has been content to approach and appreciate simply as *surfaces*.

I'm thinking in particular of all the photographs of more-or-less vernacular buildings in which the presence of doors and windows seems to figure as a warning or a refusal — an invitation not to go inside, not even in our imaginations. If we read these features as figural apertures, embouchures, metaphorical eyes and mouths set in fantastic stone faces, they nevertheless function primarily to bring us back to ourselves and to our own interiority, rather than inviting us to conjure and elaborate on the interiority of some imaginary 'other.'

These multiple overlapping layers of space in turn seem to be connected to the multiple layers of overlapping and cross-cutting *intentionality* that traverse the experiences and events this visual essay tries to encompass. There is Camiel's work, of course — both the finished works, and the processes which make it possible; the work that is made and exposed in the light, and the darkness in which the materials from which it is assembled are held in reserve, waiting to be deployed. But there are also your own works which you have made from 'his' objects, in which you establish a wholly new and other relationship to and between them. And then there is this visual essay which once more repurposes and reconfigures not only those objects and those works, but also a whole archive of interrelated images — both your images, and those of Camiel.³

The result is that while this essay-in-images seems to me entirely cogent and coherent on its own terms, I am still uncertain not only where the 'material' ends, and where the 'work' begins, but also

exactly whose 'material/work' it is I am looking at! But maybe this ambiguity is intentional? How do you see your work relating to Camiel's work? Your spaces to his spaces?

Remco Roes: I highly appreciate the way in which Camiel's domain (both his house, and his store room and studio) is a place where things have value, where objects can find a sort of (resting) place — their *proper* place. Over the course of our collaboration, I progressively came to feel more at home in his 'archive,' in which I increasingly read a peaceful waiting (as opposed to the initial wave of dynamic sensory impulses that greet you when you first find yourself facing all these objects).

My own spaces can only be constructed upon archives (or places) like this. My spaces are parasites in a way. Just like this whole project is, in a way, a parasite that uses Camiel, his surroundings, his materials and his refuse. And perhaps in a way *dematerialises* them. In my work I do use physical fragments (albeit sparingly), but also, as you noted, a range of immaterial visual fragments.

Practically and physically, a key difference between the spaces in/of our works is that mine are continuously in flux, never fixed, and only ever temporarily framed. For Camiel, who sees himself very much as a 'modern' artist, his work is always something that is stable, framed or fixed (as in physically glued), once and for all time. Throughout our collaborations, he has always been very open to and interested in my way of doing things. But he could never himself embrace (nor, perhaps, fully understand) my motives for making works that exist only to fall apart again, to collapse back into the dark collections of barely identified objects from which they came.

With regard to the spaces Camiel finds, as opposed to those he makes, in his photographs of houses, for example, I share his fascination for the patina of these places, and perhaps also for their mystery and inaccessibility. (I like your notion of them existing only as surface — as places that are not, in the three-dimensional sense, 'spaces,' that we are not able to go inside). At the same time, I try to escape from or supersede the 'simple' or singular aesthetic of these images as material from the past, just as I try to produce work that borrows Camiel's material but is not dependent on his processes or aesthetic. Perhaps it is also that my definition of what constitutes 'refuse' — the disused, the peripheral — is much broader than his, and one that in particular stretches to the limits of immateriality.

This difference may resonate with the way we each of us relates to the virtual space of the computer — a space which is, for Camiel, a nightmare. Although I am equally fascinated by physical spaces, my work also attempts to explore the fringes, offcuts and backrooms of the virtual. At least, it includes these more immaterial forms of virtuality as a component of, or environment for, the work.

PS: Does this perhaps explain why, in this visual essay, Camiel's *body* is so present, and yours so absent? (Though your body is present nonetheless. Not only do we sometimes see your hands, but it is also

your body that is moving through most of these spaces, and taking up these positions with your camera, to make these images possible). For Camiel's body is *radically* present here, in a way that goes far beyond any existing conventions around the visual documentation of 'the artist at work.'

Indeed, he is present in these images less as an artist than as a body. He exists for us as, at different times: a solid form draped in red, seen from the back; a head of wonderfully unruly white hair; a hand held in a position that is deliberate, and deliberately suspended, as if waiting ready to pounce or grasp, but not yet; a posture, a gesture, an attitude, that is also an opacity, in(to) which I can read no simple intention. Above all, perhaps, he is present as a physical *standard*, a rule against which we can gauge *scale*. The measure, if not of all things, then of *these things, his things* — the things that he has chosen for himself. He is, in Pallasmaa's phrase, 'the sole locus of reference, memory, imagination and integration,'⁴ if not in the world, then at least in *his* domain.

Reading your essay, then, I also learn to read his work in a different way — to see his Tatlinesque-towers made out of plasterer's ladders and platforms, if not as figures for his body, then as figures which make sense first of all in relation to that body — in relation to its refusals as well as its invitations, its turning away, as well as its turning towards. But also to see the old brick factories along the Rupel where he marches forward, collapses prostrate among the debris, or simply turns his camera, motionless, on their ruined forms, as not only programmatic industrial spaces trapped in their own historicity, but also *human* spaces, spaces that may have a future as well as a past, and so as potentially habitable, even if (for now, at least) they can only be inhabited by ghosts, or dreams, or artists. Indeed, I learn from these images to see traces of his form and figure even in his absences: not least, in every trace of red that survives him and persists — in a pair of boots, a jam jar lid, an industrial vacuum cleaner, the handles of a pair of scissors, a worksite lantern, or the number six.

It is as if Camiel's work constitutes not only an heroic attempt to salvage and insist upon the past — upon a whole series of pasts that would generally and stereotypically be seen as superseded, defunct, and out-of-date — but his remediation of the past, its reconstruction and *reanimation*, is itself only possible through his decision to place his own body within these spaces, and so prepare them through his persistent presence for new forms of habitation, new forms of experiencing, new forms of living.

In so doing, his body becomes for us, in its very physicality, both trace and promise of a temporality that is irreducible to any linear idea of 'history,' of an objecthood that is incommensurable with any marketable commodity. In his work, it is the arrangement and organisation of these apparently random and yet-not-so random objects that becomes an allegory for what has been, on a larger stage, both lost and found. And in your essay, it is Camiel's body itself that becomes the allegory of this allegory — of a new possibility of relationship between those pasts that are past, and those that are still big with the promise of some as yet undetermined future.

Elsewhere in your work, your own body is often very present. Yet here it is almost as if your body belongs with the darkness of the store room, rather than the brightly-lit and colourful spaces of the work itself. You are even wearing a black jumper when you do, briefly, appear! How would you describe the function of the body in your own work? Does it mediate spaces, interior and/or exterior, in the same way that Camiel's does in your *mise-en-scène*? Can the differences in your aesthetics be traced to different physical habits, different sensory preferences?

RR: In my work, in which I would of course include this visual essay, I try to embrace the idea of surfaces without interiority in terms very close to those you sketch out above when speaking of Camiel. Of course, this may risk sounding 'superficial!' But I believe that engaging with the sheer sensory givenness of textures and of surface patterns, with their raw un-conceptualised immediacy, is a completely valid way of dealing with life, and indeed, one that is almost Zen-like in its rigour. Appreciating the whole texture or field of an object as a surface to be approached experientially, and in its own right, instead of as necessarily the carrier of some hidden, embedded hierarchy of clustered concepts...

Even the simplest surface has an unlimited complexity — a complexity that cannot be reduced to a simple set of underlying concepts. On the surface, there is *only* the unending complexity, the complexity of the surface itself, and of our own sensory responses to it. And perhaps this is what my own practice is always seeking to foreground. It departs from the (existing) visual and spatial complexity to be discovered within refuse, within rejected and found-again materials (and immaterials), which it then re-composes, so as to form resonances, superficial patterns of interference...

When I choose the fragments I use, I do not expect or need to know anything about their history. And even if I did have such knowledge, I would probably not have the ability to comprehend it fully or deploy it properly. It is vitally important for me that there is some kind of history, some kind of past use, some kind of story that they carry with them. In this respect, I think, I am not unlike Camiel. However, unlike Camiel, I do not impute any extra-artistic value to this history. In that sense, I treat my material as an even more impenetrable surface than he does! For Camiel, there are always conceptual constructions and reasons behind his use of a particular piece of refuse. He often relates his objects to a certain (over)view he has of society.

And while Camiel and I definitely share an affinity for materials that are weathered and disused, he limits himself to classical materials (paper, wood, metal, and so on), while my work also includes, potentially, everything, even those equally sensual entities we tend to define as 'non-material' (a digital photograph, for example, or a quote from a song lyric by Einstürzende Neubauten,⁵ to give just two examples). This is what enables me to include, as I do here, the artist himself as a kind of sculpture within this essay, as if he were himself a fragment within the collection from which I start my work. His physical presence in the essay — or rather, its image — functions as one more brick in my own, essentially virtual, construction.

PS: It is as if the resonance between your practice and Camiel's, your conscious and unconscious points of contact, serve to activate your differences instead of repressing them.

RR: Arguably, that is a very good definition of artistic research! But I think it is also important to point out that the virtual is not simply opposed to the material and the sensual. The virtual is always embedded in the material, and it is only through what always remains *sensory* experience that we can have any form of access to it.

PS: But what then does the human body become when it enters into contact with the virtual in this way — when it becomes an *image*? When the external world that this body internalises is no longer a three-dimensional world that is 'out there,' beyond us, external to us, with its own (hidden) interiors that can resonate with ours, and its own specific histories, but simply a surface, a pure exterior? More specifically, what happens to *your* body?

RR: If I choose to treat my source material as one large surface (from which I take care not to draw any personal conclusions), it is certainly in part because I want to take a more distanced, detached look at the world. And one could see this as leading to a distance from my own body, also as establishing an *absence* of that body. However, at the same time, it could also be said that through this approach, everything I touch becomes my body: my body of work, my observations, my material...

I referred above to the way I compose the elements I use, without knowledge of their conceptual-historical background, of their place within the (normal) functioning of society. But their place in relation to my body is essential to my process, because my body is my selection mechanism. It is by placing my body into some given environment that I am able to raggpick these fragments that will become, one day, a work. The world is, in that sense, a very very large surface, which I re-compose in my own work as a series of small patchworks, that are closer in scale and in humour to my own 'physical habits' and 'sensory preferences,' as you put it.

So I choose to be around Camiel, or to work between Belgium and Australia with AA,⁶ or to work on and/or at any other given location. Up till now, it has always been an exhibition and the exhibition site, which have provided me with my pretexts, or excuses, to make work. It has always been the (external) space that activated my body, through that contact with the exterior. Currently, however, I am questioning this pattern, as part of a larger attempt to reconstruct some form of autonomy within my practice. Perhaps this search for autonomy, then, could also be seen as a search for some body, and thus, for a more explicit sense of my own body and personality (as opposed to no-one, any-one)?... But to say more about that, I would have to actually make a work that makes that idea seem workable, and not just talk about it! And that work is still to come...

NOTES

1. We are aware of the fact that this 'dialogue' starts *in medias res* and would like to emphasise that this is similar to how one inevitably starts out when looking at the images that accompany this text.
2. Camiel Van Breedam (1936 –) is a Belgian collage and assemblage artist whose career spans almost 50 years. One of the key figures in 'assemblage art' — the recuperation and re-configuration of derelict materials — Van Breedam's work is based on a vast personal collection of objects and materials abandoned during the decline of the former industrial area in the Belgian Rupel region.
3. In 2011, Roes (1981) began a collaboration with Van Breedam, through which he has created a series of works — temporary site-specific installations, artist's books, ... — in which he reappropriates objects from Van Breedam's collection and deploys them within his own very different aesthetic of assemblage.
4. Juhani Pallasmaa, 'Selfhood and the World. Lived Space, Vision and Hapticity,' in *Senses and the City: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Urban Sensecapes*, eds Mădălina Diaconu, Eva Heuberger, Ruth Mateus-Berr, and Lukas Marcel Vosicky (Vienna: Lit Verlag, 2011) 56.
5. The title of the original collaboration between Roes and Van Breedam was 'Ich suche nichts, ich Räume nur auf,' which translates as 'I am not looking for anything, I am merely tidying up.' This is part of the lyrics of the song 'Grundstück,' by the band Einstürzende Neubauten (Collapsing new buildings). Likewise, the title of this visual essay comes from the last sentence of the same song: 'Bis ich deine Träume in Dunkle leuchten seh.'
6. In 2014, Roes created a work with Alis Garlick for the *Situation* symposium at RMIT, which comprised a site-specific installation, a series of performances, a virtual conversation-correspondance (Roes contributed to the work from Belgium, without ever setting foot in Australia), and an artists' book. This work and its implications for how we think about art as research are discussed in more detail in Roes and Snowdon (forthcoming 2018).

BIOGRAPHIES

Remco Roes is an ex-architect, an artist and a postdoctoral researcher in the FRAME research group of the Faculty of Architecture and Arts at Hasselt University. His practise-based PhD Research titled *Traversing the interior landscape: five dialogues in existential space* (2016) explores how a given everyday space can function as the basis for its own meaningful rearrangement. His current research focusses on secular sacrality and the experience of time in relation to space. Besides that, he is also particularly interested in the schism between words and works within the context of artistic research.

Peter Snowdon is a British filmmaker based in Belgium. He holds a doctorate in visual arts from the University of Hasselt, and currently teaches filmmaking in the visual anthropology programme at Leiden University. His work combines documentary process with formal experimentation. He has made two feature-length films, *The Uprising* (2013), a montage film based on YouTube videos from the Arab revolutions, and *Le Parti du Rêve de Logement* (2016), an improvised fiction film about the Brussels housing crisis created in collaboration with the grassroots campaign group ALARM.