



## **Reading the City**

A conversation between  
Frans-Willem Korsten, Wouter Osterholt and Elke Uitentuis

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Zicht . Op . Zalmhaven

## I Bread and Wine

**Setting:** Three people are seated at a dinner table; Elke Uitentuis sits by the window with Frans-Willem Korsten to her left. Opposite the table sits Wouter Osterholt. Esmé Valk stands at the head of the table.

**Esmé Valk:** This is still water and this is sparkling. And I have this Italian wine, they're actually both Italian. This one was apparently a dry wine very full with flavour and this one looked nice.

[Laughter]

**EV:** It reads "Brilliant clear colour with hints of emerald green. Elegant and subtle bouquet with refreshing grapefruit notes."

**Wouter Osterholt:** Okay, good introduction to the wine.

**EV:** Would you like any of these?

**WO:** Yes, I would like the right one. [He points to the one that was described by the salesman as being full with flavour.]

**Elke Uitentuis:** Yeah, for me the same.

[Esmé walks away from the dinner table to open the wine.]



The first sourdough bread from Esmé's kitchen.

**Frans-Willem Korsten:** Perhaps it's wise to solve the issue of politics first. That's, at least, where I would like to begin. If I remember correctly from the mail conversation, we discussed your desire to move away from politics, to do something without politics or to do something outside politics.

**EU:** Maybe there is a desire, but it is also unavoidable. I think that is kind of a tension we are interested in. Politics are unavoidable but we try to be as objective as possible to analyse the political structures. In that sense we inter-

pret political structures as a negotiation about space.

**WO:** As soon as we start to intervene in a certain context there is already a negotiation about space and public. This is already about politics. So we should define what kind of politics we are talking about.

**FWK:** Uh-huh. [Agreeing]

**WO:** And probably you are the best in defining what these words mean.

[Frans-Willem laughs.]

**FWK:** The distinction that I like to work with is Chantal Mouffe's distinction between politics and the political, which links back to Rancière's *la police et la politique*. Politics is about the way in which we organize space and time. Also in terms of administration and execution. And the political would be anything that opens up a new possibility. Which could be on a micro or macro level, and it could be something that could be noticed publicly or not.

**WO:** But it needs to be publicly noticed, right?

**FWK:** Yes, right. This is a difficulty. If you take the opening up of the political, or the opening up that is implied by the political, it may be defined, in part, as natality – there is the birth of something new. But Hannah Arendt also said that politics is about orchestrated and organized action. You need to do something together in order to establish something.

**EU:** ... to create something.

**FWK:** Hannah Arendt, however, thinks within the parameters of the antebellum and modernism and actually I think that Rancière is framed in the same way. Perhaps we're in a different ballpark at the moment. The political need not be about orchestrated or collective action. That's what I would like to talk about with you also. You could also think that if politics is about the organization of time and space, why not reserve, then, a position for something or somebody that is doing something that is perhaps unnoticed at first, but that we will start to notice at some time. Or the action itself will start to orchestrate something. So the question may be: What is this beginning? Is the beginning the orchestration of action or is the political the beginning of the orchestration of action?

**EU:** But then the political is in the individual or is it already in the public? What I notice is that there are all these different interests that are related to the political but it is not an organized structure yet and that it becomes politics when it becomes organised.

**WO:** You mean when you define a certain interest in a certain context?

**EU:** Yeah.

**FWK:** No, again the distinction is between politics and the political.

**WO:** But why do we need this distinction?

**FWK:** The distinction can be related to the distinction between power and potency. You have the execution of power, which is part of the common definition of politics. But something may be happening that is going to change politics, change power. And you can't define that as power, you need to define that as potency.

This opens up a far bigger realm of possible political interventions. If you would want to, you could call it an intervention, but it's also possible that you don't intervene at all, but you are just doing something that in the end will prove to have been an opening up ...

**WO:** You mean a re-organisation of a power structure? Or do we talk about the people who are using this power? Or the manifestations in space that belong to the political decisions? How should we clarify what it relates to? And why do we need these definitions?

**FWK:** Next year I'm organizing a conference with Bram Ieven called *Waiting for the political moment*. Our analysis is that the political in the pivotal sense has been hollowed out in our times. If you define politics as the organization of time and space then the political is opening up a different form of the organization of time and space. But as it is, nowadays, we're kind of caught in a system where the political has moved to another realm. Whereas politicians say they are the performers or the executioners of the political, they are just being administrators. That what you could truly call 'organizing the world' is happening elsewhere. The force that defines where new things are to happen is not inside the political realm but originates somewhere else. We are not deciding about the use and implications of that force politically. Politics at the moment is just running behind things constantly. If you want to preserve the classical political notion you think of people deciding somehow how they're going to organize time and space. The other option is that

you do away with the political, that you decide there is no decision involved, that there is just a running behind things. We've been thrown into, or have thrown ourselves into modernity and we're running behind what is happening constantly.

**WO:** What kind of things are organising time and space in your opinion?

**FWK:** You just did a project in Cairo, right?

**EU:** Yes.

**FWK:** Who organized Cairo? Who made this city into what it is? Or is the city just growing? Or my question to you is: if you go to Cairo, do you think of how that city is designed? Is it designed? I think it is not. It is just growing.

**WO:** Well, there are layers of design.

**EU:** But those layers don't have anything to do with each other, they often clash. They contradict each other in terms of vision behind the design and they're build upon each other. It's not organised with an overall vision at all.

**WO:** It used to be. Hundred years ago when the French were designing downtown Cairo they had a certain idea of how to do it.

**EU:** But that was just a part of the city.

**WO:** We focused merely on a relatively small district in downtown Cairo. What is striking when you first come to Cairo is that you see a lot of informal architecture. And sometimes the people negotiate with their neighbour about a certain design, so they share a planning structure. And sometimes they have to talk and negotiate with some sort of power from governmental organisations. The informal architecture is more dynamic.

**EU:** What you see over there is that there are organisations who organise urban harmony, a political organisation that's behind things that are happening. The people who are using the infrastructure are inventing through the improvisations they make and by how they make the space their own, which has nothing to do with the layer of French, historical architecture.

**WO:** You see that they are always behind in the planning department in cities like Cairo, São Paulo and Shang Hai. In all these major, big cities the planning is done individually almost. Some big projects of course not. But the planning department is also trailing behind in terms of mapping. That is kind of interesting, seeing it from the perspective of the organisation of power and structure.

**FWK:** Very. So perhaps we have to redefine

very basic notions of politics and the political, which is what we talked about through the mail.

**WO:** But also put them in a certain framework of examples. If they're only words it gets really abstract for me, but as soon as we talk about the city and the power organisation within the city I see what you mean with these words.

**FWK:** So if I would apply the notion of the political to Cairo, then it would not just mean the power struggle to keep the city together, to keep it organized, to keep the water running, to allow people to go from here to there as smoothly as possible. The question is: could you think of a completely different Cairo?

That you would say: "Okay, this is how we've done it so far. But we have to reinvent it." Where would the idea of such a reinvention of Cairo come from? And would it have to concern an orchestrated action, or would it have to be somebody somewhere that starts something as a result of which the city changes?

[Esmé serves small, yellow dishes with wild mushroom soup to go with the sourdough bread and the roasted garlic butter.]



Esmé is preparing gnocchi in the mobile kitchen.

## II Wild Mushroom Soup

**WO:** In relation to our project we noticed that after doing the whole workshop in which we involved the community and asked them about what they would like to change in their own environment ... At the end we concluded that there is a need, not so much to change their neighbourhood physically with lots of different colours, or different buildings, or functions of buildings or what ever, but what they really need is a meeting point. Like a place where people can come together and talk about the problems. People come together and they talk about the news or they gossip about each other and their friends. But there is a need, really a strong need for the organisation of their space, for a meeting point. It's almost like a need for a union of the street, that they are strong together. It's a difficult government. They face a lot of resistance and they can't run their businesses in the ways they want to. They face a lot of corruption. Like if you are a shop owner a police officer may come to your shop and say: "You have to give me two hundred pounds or otherwise I will shut your shop down for a week." Then you see that people don't stand together.

**EU:** Because they are all afraid that their shop will be closed as well. They want a place where people from the neighbourhood can come together, discuss the problems that are going on in the neighbourhood and come to solutions together.

[The sound of wine glasses clinking.]

**EU:** Cheers.

**FWK:** Cheers.

**WO:** Proost. The reason I gave this example is that as soon as they are in it together and they can make decisions together against the government, then they are in a position to do something. Because on their own they're quite vulnerable.

**FWK:** For me the fascinating thing about this project is that through the maquette you organize space and time differently. You give another view, which is partly an overview, and as a result of that people start to reflect on where they are. The fascinating thing in this case is, that what they appear to desire, consequently, actually is a space where the political could appear. They're looking for a space where they

could establish a new opening.

**WO:** And in a true and honest manner. Because politics in Cairo is not done in a really honest manner.

**EU:** Well, you don't know if it's not honest. But the maquette is a place where they [The residents of this area.] have a voice. I mean a lot of the residents' proposals were not honest at all, some were horrible.

**FWK:** Like what?

**EU:** Well, they would send all the car mechanics out of the district, while it is a car mechanic district.

[Laughter]

**WO:** ... in order to clean the streets. Or they wanted to have a fancy restaurant on the corner of one of the streets and the most fancy restaurant they could think of was Kentucky Fried Chicken. They see it as a clean and hygienic restaurant. In our understanding of Kentucky Fried Chicken there are other connotations, like globalism. We have different sets of values towards this. So that is kind of interesting to see.

**FWK:** Why did they come to this thing that somehow embodied the way in which you had organized space and time?

**WO:** To the maquette you mean?

**FWK:** Yes.



A KFC restaurant was added to the maquette after it was suggested by Citizen No.9 during the workshop.

**EU:** There are several reasons, I think.

They liked this overview and that it was very personal. They could relate to the maquette as it was their neighbourhood. The sensibility of seeing everything in detail was flabbergasting.

**WO:** For over a period of nine months there



were these people who were measuring their streets, measuring their cars, their laundry, their houses and everything. We became part of their surroundings and they were curious to what we were doing inside the studio. So they already started coming from the first week. We got to know each other and we had lots of conversations.

**FWK:** How did you communicate?

**WO:** From the start we worked together with local artist that were both capable of speaking English and Arabic. So we had translators all the time, we didn't learn a word of Arabic. But the main reason we did this project, was not only to unravel the whole society and the way in which people relate to their surroundings, but also to create a counter platform opposing the governmental gentrification plans.

**EU:** Actually it was a French organisation.

**WO:** Yes, a French organisation. Which is interesting from the historical perspective. But we were just interested in what the people themselves envisioned for the future of their street. So it was a sort of political counter movement.

**EU:** What we noticed during our stay there is that everybody is complaining about the fact that they don't have a voice. And that when they speak out, there is always a chance that they'll get arrested. Our project was like a safe haven to be able to speak out. We did everything anonymously, nobody knew who we had interviewed. We called them 'citizen number one', 'citizen number two'.

**FWK:** That's the language of the French revolution.

[Laughter]

**WO:** It's probably the same need to be anonymous.

**FWK:** Or to be able to have an equal say.

**EU:** And to avoid the position that you can be caught, not only by the government, but also by each other.

**WO:** There's a strong hierarchical structure where the society is defined by many different powers.

**FWK:** Now a question of course is, how did you get this commission? Who paid for it?

**WO:** It's a residency supported by the FBKVB. [The Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture.]

**FWK:** Why did they support it?

**WO:** That's a good question. Maybe it has to do with the overabundance of artistic activity

in Western Europe. I think it has a lot to do with the idea of distributing artistic activity over the world. There are places on earth that can be more triggered by artistic activity, and I mean not only activity which is organised or implemented by Western artists. Also from their perspective there is a need to be engaged with Western culture and a lot of young people are not able to travel so easily, it's ridiculously hard to get a visa. So when we're there we bring something of our culture and there is a sharing.

**EU:** But is this the reason the residency is there?

**WO:** No, now I'm looking for personal motivations.

**EU:** I constantly wonder about this question we are posed: "Is it acceptable, as a Dutch artist to go there while you know that the artists who are there are not capable of going to Holland?" And we go there with money and we can work for a couple of months and vice-versa it is hard, although it does happen sometimes.

**WO:** Well, the Middle East is booming. If you are an artist in Cairo and you try to change your work to be a little bit different from what you've been taught in art school, you are already in the spotlight. There is a huge interest, also coming from the West, in these artists. But the question why the FBKVB, the biggest grant supplier in the Netherlands, receives an increasing interest in their residency activities is a good question. I don't know if we should talk about this now, if it is part of the topic.

**FWK:** I think, so far, the theme we chose was politics and the political. With respect to this foundation we are talking about a matter of politics.

**EU:** Yes, of course.

**FWK:** You have the money, right? You want to internationalize. You can even argue that it is some form of neo-colonialism. But then again even when you acknowledge all these factors there remains the potential that something will happen that escapes every administration, all forms of politics, or the control of the foundation that funded it all. I think that's one of the biggest values of art, that you can't control it. Something will happen that escapes everything and this is, for a large extent, a matter of aesthetics. You came in there and from day one you made visible what you were doing and allowed people to come in. But my guess is that if you had been doing something that was

aesthetically not interesting enough the project would have failed.

**EU:** Yes, of course.

**FWK:** So what interests me the most is ...

**EU:** ... how you define what's aesthetically interesting?

**FWK:** Right. How do you do that? Or what was it?

**WO:** And the relation between aesthetics and politics, why are they so closely bound together?

**EU:** Well you just have to look around.

[Laughter]

**FWK:** I looked at the pictures you made of this project and I liked, I *liked* the maquette. I simply liked it.

**WO:** But that's just because it's a reflection of the space itself.

**FWK:** No, I think not.

**WO:** The space itself in downtown Cairo is amazing. The first week we walked through

[Laughter]

**WO:** So the whole facade is just grey, but they paint their facade, which means they paint around the window. And they do this to be visible from the streets so their friends can walk through the city and they know "Okay, this is



A street view in Cairo.

the yellow window where my friend lives." It's a need for distinction. But it's funny because it's out of pure necessity. And probably that's what I like the most, the feeling of necessity. Things are aesthetic because of necessity.

**EU:** Or you see for example a very busy intersection. And they don't want people to cross the road just like that – they cross the road everywhere they can, whenever they want to – so a big fence was built. But then they have to walk around the fence and they don't feel like it. So all the people who want to cross the road are going through a hole in the fence. Then you see people of all ages lining up to go through the hole. That's why we like Cairo.

**WO:** But it is hard to relate this sort of transparency of spontaneous planning by the people themselves to the reason why we made the maquette and why we made it so beautiful or aesthetic. But there is a connection. We were just struck by all this inventiveness and creativity that we didn't want to invent something ourselves. We just wanted to copy in order to understand and learn from them. That's why we did it.

**FWK:** Okay. The next question would be: you look at the way in which they've colored, in a very concrete sense, their environment and then you have to make the maquette which forces you to think through the questions: "What did I see and what am I going to make now?" How did you make the maquette? What kind of decisions were involved? What kind of material did you use?



The unaltered maquette of 'Model Citizens' with a clear view on the palace.

Cairo we were totally amazed by all these creative manifestations of space. People are so inventive and creative in organising their own shop or organising their own car or clothes.

**FWK:** Could you specify that?

**WO:** Yes, we have lots of pictures.

**FWK:** No, no, no. This is one of the problems of talking about this. We are so used to talking about things in terms of meaning. So what was the texture? What did you like? I mean people organize their lives everywhere.

**EU:** It's done with a lot of humour. Like for example you see people painting the outside of their apartment and they're all super bright colours, pink and yellow and blue. And they do it like this, from out of the window.

[Elke gestures painting movements.]

**WO:** As far as the arm can stretch.

**WO:** The first decision was the scale. It was related to the size of our studio, so it was practical.

**EU:** So it's also coming from necessity.

**WO:** The materials were also coming from necessity. We didn't have a broad range of materials at hand. We didn't have a laser cutter so we needed to cut by hand.

**EU:** And we wanted it to look like reality. So we started with measuring the whole neighbourhood. We went outside and first we started to do it very roughly, but of course during the work we started to become more specialised in making the maquette and also in measuring.

**WO:** Our first approach to the environment was by measuring.

**EU:** We had a ruler, we took photographs and we measured things around and then we made maps of pictures with measurements written on top. We were trying to calculate, trying to size it down to 1:35 scale and trying to experiment with material. So that it would look exactly like reality.

**FWK:** And the material was?



Elke is measuring the Townhouse building in order to make a detailed map.

**EU:** Foam and ...

**WO and EU together:** cardboard, paint, plastics, and wood, sand and a lot of dust from the street itself.

**WO:** But what was interesting was that by copying everything in detail we noticed that we sometimes didn't see an object consciously because it was just a stone. It was like first focussing on the buildings, then the fences and the cars and the streets and not seeing certain details. But every stone, every pile of rubbish, every can was part of the artificial world that we needed to copy. It was a reading of the environment.

**EU:** Very literally.

**WO:** But I found that I hadn't noticed certain things as soon as I started measuring.

**EU:** There was also someone walking in at the opening of the exhibition workshop and he said: "Hey, you forgot to make my stone." [Laughter]

**EU:** And we placed some cars on the road and they said: "No, there will never be cars parked over there."

**WO:** So we were constantly helped by all the people on the street to make it more realistic.

**FWK:** But I think a part of the aesthetics of the work is that it's not an exact copy. So you need this confrontation.

**EU:** Yeah, it is a failure.

**FWK:** It is a good failure.

[Laughter]

**WO:** Good art is a good failure.

**EU:** But we tried constantly.

**FWK:** You know when you've failed, however, to fail again or fail better ... When I was biking my way towards this place I was kind of occupied with the thought that there is something wrong with the scale of this city, or with the way in which buildings relate to one another.

**WO:** And where did you cycle?

**FWK:** Through the center. I noticed that I felt there was something wrong with the scale. What would be the frame that made me think that? You talked about this space, the workshop, that defined the scale of the things you've made. I think that's crucial. Could you just take the maquette you made and place it in another space? Perhaps it would just 'drown', perhaps not. If not, then it is probably very good.

**WO:** This image you mentioned of Rotterdam is interesting, that you have the sense that there is something wrong with its scale.

But then in your mind there exists maybe a true image of Rotterdam? What is this image?

Because it is not right with something.

**FWK:** True.

**WO:** What is this image of Rotterdam? Is it a postcard, is it an image? I think we tend to read the cities around us as images, almost more as a logo than reality itself. So maybe it's also through the images we know from the news, movies or books that we think "This image is Rotterdam."

**EU:** I have the same feeling with Rotterdam, that it's out of scale.

**FWK:** We just talked about when you were entering Cairo you saw these different ways of dealing with space, but what you didn't talk

about was the rhythm. What is the rhythm of this city?

**WO:** It's fast.

**EU:** It's like noise. It's like punk-rock noise. Have you ever seen a wedding video from Egypt?

**FWK:** No.

**EU:** Well then you hear and see all these images in bad quality and they use all these filters with hearts and things. The sound is also very bad quality and because of that it almost becomes like noise.

**WO:** Completely powerful!

**EU:** Yeah, and you can't avoid it. It's right in your face.

**WO:** You see the men, the spray cans with fire, the knives, they throw chairs and the whole lot in the sky and the pigeons. It's bombastic.

**EU:** Yeah, like kitsch. And you see phrases like: "This is the first phrase." because they use this editing programme but they can't speak English so they don't know how to use it. You're supposed to type in something.

**WO:** So you see an image of the ocean and then a photo of the bride or the couple and then projected on a blanket, which is moving in the air to the waves of the ocean, it reads: "You can put your first sentence in here."

**EU:** The rhythm of the city is like this, it's bombastic kitsch and very noisy but in a very raw way. The rhythm is unavoidable.

**WO:** But what do you understand rhythm to mean?

**FWK:** Again, we are so used to talking about reading in terms of meaning. What does it mean? And we avoid the question: "What is the rhythm?" because it's a very difficult issue to address. Likewise, the question of what the texture is of the city, is a question we have difficulty in dealing with. How does it feel to look at it, to touch it, to smell it? We start to stumble and to stutter once we start to talk about it. This is also why it is so difficult to answer the question: why do you think

Rotterdam is out of sync? It's probably a collection of factors. You sense somehow that they have an ambition, here, to turn this into a beautiful city. Or perhaps stop making it a messy city.

**WO:** And also from different perspectives and different times coming together.

**FWK:** If I understand you correctly, you think the city is doing its own thing in a sense. It escapes direction. Rotterdam at this moment is

over-directed.

**EU:** Uh-huh.

**WO:** Yeah.

**FWK:** The idea appears to be to say, now we're going to make a beautiful new building, and again and again. Who asked for these beautiful buildings? I didn't.

**WO:** So there is an over abundance.

**FWK:** Right. Are all the people from Rotterdam asking for all these beautiful buildings? Do they want this? Do they feel the necessity? It feels as if it is turning into something awkward.

**WO:** And what to do with the opposite idea, how can you force a sort of freedom when you have too much planning going on? Especially a couple years ago, the art that I liked was about creating a void. In photography you saw from the late eighties from America a huge interest in the so called 'non-places'. Places that were left behind or industrial spaces in the city.

I think the increasing interest by artists in these places had to do exactly with this emptiness and the feeling of no control by the state government and city government.

**FWK:** That would be the desire for the political.

**WO:** How can you control? How can you set value on these places? How can you put it into work, into real politics? Yeah of course you have these plots in new neighbourhoods where people can design their own house, so they're free to design. But this is an artificial kind of freedom.

**EU:** It's really nice. [Referring to the food.]

**EV:** Yeah, you like it?

**WO:** Yeah.

**FWK:** Yeah.

**EV:** Can I take your large plate, and then I will take these too, and the small plates? If they're clean enough for you they can be used for the salad.

**FWK:** There is also a problem when the city is not being controlled. It's not that long ago that cities were enclosed spaces surrounded with what we used to call nature. Now there's this constant colonisation of space in and around the city. Cities are expanding limitlessly which I think is a major problem. Not just in terms of whether we want to survive on this planet because we're not going to survive since any species in the end will disappear. So the question is how we want to survive or how we want to organise time and space. There is something very

troubling about the expanding city in the sense that the thing is just growing and nobody is in control of this growth. There's no political decision that says: "Let's stop here, this is enough."

**WO:** In Cairo for example, there is not so much space for them to go because of the huge desert, it is kind of closed in.

**FWK:** Do you think that it is an interesting problem: the limit of the city? Because it's connected to what you just said, that people are looking for spaces where the political is opening up. But perhaps we should also look for spaces where we say: "This is where it stops." I mean, a painting has to stop somewhere, we have to stop somewhere, so where does the city stop?

**WO:** Like the whole debate about the green park in the West?

**EU:** I feel that here in the West it is constantly expanding, there is no limitation to the city. What is Rotterdam? I don't know what Rotterdam is. Where does it begin and where does it end? It's like Los Angeles.

**WO:** Yeah, that's enormous. That's a good metaphor of a sprawling city. It devoured all its nature at its borders for a long time. It's interesting now that a lot of artists and collaborations are working with the homestead; the garden city movement. People who try to get nature into the city by creating vegetable and city gardens. That's an interesting movement because it creates something from within the city itself that was for a long time absent. It's the other end of the tail which is coming in again. I don't know if it is already on a level that we recognise it as being there, but you can see a higher interest in this movement. It's also related to a lot of activism, like the bicycle movement in LA is enormous. Especially because it's such a car culture city.

**EU:** But this has to do with the limitations. Los Angeles can't grow any further because it's in a valley in the mountains, so they start to build in the mountains and then they call it an extension of Los Angeles.

[The glasses are filled up again.]

**WO:** Yeah. They even built in the high desert. It's quicksand.

**FWK:** Is the notion of the limit something you would like to think through? Because if you talk about politics and the political it could also be a political move to say: "This is where it has to stop." And then you would have to enforce things. As it is now, the city is enforce-

ing its own self. As human beings we are really busy with ourselves, looking at each other on 55 channels. So, actually, there is a politics of enforcement happening without the political choice to let that happen. To turn that into a political choice would be like saying: "Okay, we are now going to cover the entire earth with city-scapes." That could be a political choice, that could be interesting. This is something I'm struggling with. Because if you think through the idea of limiting the city, it means that you would have to think of politics, a political system that would say: "No, you are not allowed to have as many children as you want. One, one is enough. No, your house shouldn't be that big, it should be smaller. No ..." So you end up with a society ...

**EU:** Yeah, you limit someone's individual freedom, by limiting the city.

**WO:** You limit the economy.

**EU:** But that's also strange, what we saw now in Victorville. The houses that are built, they're way too big.

**FWK:** Way too big! [Laughs] That's what I think, they're way too big.

**WO:** For people that didn't earn it. Of course they can say everybody deserves a big house, but seen financially they didn't earn it.

**FWK:** Do they need it?

**WO:** No.

**EU:** No. But here the people who would live in such a house would be the director of a bank. The houses there are *that* huge. And then there is a truck driver and a nurse living in it.

**WO:** It's a real mansion, a really big villa. But that's the American dream, the idea of expanding, the idea of progress.

**FWK:** In terms of politics and aesthetics this is the expression of power. "I have the power to do this." All kinds of other organisms, life, has to disappear because you and I have the power to impress, to go on with our exercise of power. I think this concerns one of the major political battles that is just waiting for us. That we amongst each other are going to decide: "No, you can't built that big, otherwise you'll destroy everything in the end."

**WO:** Oh, we already have an animal party in parliament. [Laughs] We're almost there.

**FWK:** I live in a street with 35 houses and average families: two parents, two kids. What I've seen happening in the last five years is that people are expanding their houses. They're building annexes. And twenty gardens now,

also because of certain examples people gave to each other, are completely paved. Although you have this artistic movement of getting the garden and vegetables back into the city, in terms of numbers that's not what's happening.

**EU:** Yeah, it's the counter parties pavement.

In Los Angeles we saw trees being cut in squares.

**WO:** Organised nature, yeah. No, of course we saw an increase in this notion of the homestead or the city garden movement, because we are interested in it. In terms of numbers I don't know. But I do think that with the whole green mafia, the green movement, people are more conscious about it. I call it green mafia because there is also a whole economy behind it and the interest of people who want to be in power.

**EV:** Would you like the other white wine, I can also get it.

**WO:** No, I'm fine.

**FWK:** But you call it the mafia.

**WO:** Yeah, because I don't fully trust these



A street view in Los Angeles.

things. I don't fully believe that it will be green. Like with the green energy that you are really supporting wind or solar energy. So there is a lot of distrust.

**FWK:** Is there a space, in this context, where we could meet and talk to one another? And say: "Are we doing the right thing?"

**EU:** Where you can trust?

**FWK:** In a sense, yes.

**WO:** I wish I could say like 'the church'.

[Laughter]

**FWK:** We have the media.

**EU:** I don't trust it here at all.

**FWK:** No. We have a quasi-democracy. This is, actually, my point about the hollowing out of the political.

**WO:** And the hollowing out of the city.

**FWK:** As a political unity, yeah, right.

**EU:** If you ask something to a member of parliament they always refer you to someone else. And they never give an answer and I don't trust it at all. And when I look at the television and what I see happening with all these talk shows. I don't trust it at all, it's not reality but it is interpreted as such. There are no real events or happenings anymore, people don't meet each other anymore. So they get this information from abstract media and form their opinions upon that. So you don't know who to trust, because you don't interact face to face.

**WO:** So that's why a lot of artists started to work in collaboration. Doing conversation pieces and creating platforms which they believe are truly transparent, and where true meeting can happen.

**FWK:** I agree.

**WO:** Even in this work in which we are sitting and some of the works we saw in this exhibition.

**FWK:** Then you see that the desire you traced in Cairo is operative here as well. And, no mistake, it might be a political move without it being an explicitly political move.

**WO:** Like a movement you mean?

**FWK:** Yeah. You have to start somewhere and I think ...

**WO:** But you mean in terms of size? You seem to talk about bundling all this energy in one big movement and going to The Hague ...

**FWK:** No, no, no! At the moment I think politics is also about realising what is possible, given the circumstances. At the moment it seems as if everything is possible. We are well up into our necks in consumer society and we appear somehow to be able to organize the world as we want it. Perhaps it will just have to show that this is not possible. I mean the climate is changing and we see it happening in front of our very eyes. Perhaps, we are not sure, in ten years the ice caps will grow again. We don't know, and yet ... I think the phrase of Walter Benjamin kind of describes it accurately: "We are hurled towards the future." That's what's happening.

**WO:** What do you mean by 'hurled'?

**FWK:** We don't say: "This is where we want to go to." We're just taken up in a huge acceleration. And I don't want to take a position that would imply that this is morally wrong, so it's better to just look at it. This is what's happening. And yet the political question is: "Do we want this to happen? Is this right?"



**EU:** But then you are also addressing the question of what freedom is?

**FWK:** Right!

**EU:** They are talking about freedom, but ...

**FWK:** No, there is no freedom at all at the moment.

**EU:** No. But people are defending it as if it's ...

**FWK:** They are defending the fetish of freedom, but we don't have freedom.

**WO:** Isn't it always measured in percentages, to a certain degree? How much freedom can you have? It depends on where you are, in which city, what kind of occupations you have. So it's relative to its situation.

**FWK:** Freedom is not something you can define independently. It's really correlative. What you see in general is that people are very willing to adapt, to go along. To buy a car and use the same roads and every morning stand in a traffic jam.

**WO:** Yeah, there are a lot of different freedoms as well. Like in Cairo, and of course this relates to their financial situation as well, when a car breaks down they have the freedom or the inventfulness to fix it in a minute using all sorts of materials. Whereas here we would need to work a week to earn the money to bring the car to the garage and then it's fixed. If you compare these together then we're not as free as we think. We need to work in order to get things done.

**FWK:** As for freedom and work, what I'm struggling with at the moment is my position as a scholar. If I want to be free as much as possible, if I think freedom is valuable, then how, as a scholar, am I working towards that? That's a tough one, and I think the same goes for artists at the moment. Because you need a new commission, don't you? And I need my articles and to say something of value with it. Just in terms of production, I need to produce.

**WO:** You can have critique on your institute, like the whole institutional critique. You can do it.

**FWK:** [Laughs] That's part of the production.

**WO:** Part of the freedom is the idea that critique is allowed. So critique can never have critique on the real essence of freedom.

Or in democracy there is a tolerance towards critique. But how much are we really free to criticise?

**FWK:** I think that is a major question to ourselves, if we see what's happening.

**WO:** Mmm! [Referring to the salad that Esmé

has just brought to the table.]

**FWK:** That looks wonderful.

**EV:** It's part of the main course. But you can start if you like.

**WO:** No, we will wait. We'll just look at it.

**FWK:** So ... in this context I am trying to develop my idea of reading the city. My major political issue at the moment is a broadening of sensibility. That's it, I suppose. I don't have a more particular political goal than the broadening of sensibility.

**WO:** You mean not only for yourself but also for your public?

**FWK:** Yeah.



Elke Uitentuis and Frans-Willem Korsten.

**EU:** But do you think that opens up free space?

**FWK:** I think so. If you take a look around you see all kinds of things of which you could say: "Oh that is beautiful, that is wonderful. Something is happening." But on average, you see a small scale orchestration of individual moves. So for instance in the Dutch city there is remarkably little violence. How is that possible? I think it's possible because we live in a society that translates or transports violence. In human history we have never lived in a system as violent as this one. Massive destruction of environment and life. And we don't see it. The violence is being brought elsewhere in order to allow us, people amongst ourselves, to live as peacefully as possible. Which, in turn, depends entirely on the functioning of the consumer-machine.

**EU:** Do you mean like the wars that are being fought outside?

**FWK:** Also, so-called outsiders.

**WO:** Or the migrants who are being kept in the refugee camps of North Africa. And we are terrified with the ones who come here.

But that's not an image of violence, so much.

**FWK:** I think it is.

**WO:** I mean, the immigrants who come here we don't see them as violent but maybe more as an abstract attack on the social system.

**EU:** But the response to them is violent.

**FWK:** Terribly so.

**WO:** Yeah.

**FWK:** What would happen if we would say: "Okay, we can't transport our rubbish, all the filth we produce, we can't transport it elsewhere anymore. We'll have to keep it somewhere near the place where this filth is being produced." What would that mean? I think it would create huge social uproar if you would say: "Okay, you're producing on average five bags of filth each week. That's fine, but we're going to keep it in your neighbourhood for the coming year." Where is all this filth going to right now? Do you *know* that? Why not? I can know, but I don't want to know. But it's going somewhere.

**WO:** Being burned.

**FWK:** Part of it. In a sense this is violence: There is a place, somewhere, that used to be a forrest or a meadow and now you're throwing your filth there.

**WO:** In this sense Cairo is an interesting example because 99% of all the garbage is being recycled because of economics. Everything which is being thrown away is valuable. Even paper and waste products of food.

**FWK:** How does that work?

**EU:** Families knock on the door and ask:

"Do you have garbage?" And then they take it from you, you give them some money, three or five pounds. And they bring the garbage back to a big factory they own and the women sort everything.

**WO:** And the factory is just a department in the city. It's not really a factory. It's just houses and the streets are literally covered in rubbish. And children and women and elderly are picking everything and sorting things out and this goes to their neighbourhoods with recycle departments from where it is being distributed elsewhere.

**FWK:** I think Cairo is, in a sense, way beyond an average Dutch city in this respect.

**WO:** But it just lacks money.

**FWK:** Yeah, but conceptually this is how it should be, I think.

**WO:** Well the people that need to sort out all those things are really poor, they live under horrible conditions, they don't get older than 40 or 50 because of all the poison in the gar-

bage. So this is not what you want. But that 99% gets to be recycled, that's what you want.

**FWK:** Yes.

**EU:** The recycling is not done out of environmental reasons.

**EU and WO:** Not at all.

**EU:** They don't care about that, it's not so much an issue.

**WO:** Some do care. Of course there are a lot of people who heard about climate change. But the majority we spoke to hadn't.

**FWK:** No of course not.

**EU:** They were like: "Global warming? Huh?" [Laughs] "What are you talking about?"

**FWK:** I have a lot of students either coming from China or students who are going to China. I've never been there so far, I would love to go there. We don't know what's coming towards us. In terms of environment, the scale ...

I mean China is Europe, plus Europe, plus Europe, plus Europe – four times Europe. And it is developing itself within two decades, three decades. At the moment they're just building thousands of cities. The average city is eight hundred thousand inhabitants. That is three times Rotterdam. The scale is immense. And these people, indeed, just the people who are living there, are not thinking about the North Pole and whether it disappears or not. Why should they? How many Europeans do?

**WO:** For us it was really interesting when we were in Los Angeles at the Hammer museum. It's one of the biggest museums in Los Angeles for art and architecture. They had a big series on urban China and all the matters that deal with the urban development of the last decades. There were people from economy studies and political studies and sociology, anthropology taking part in a discussion series. There were about ten different Sundays that we attended. They were all talking about China from a very interesting perspective. They were all, I would say, afraid and curious at the same time. But they were really afraid and negative about all the things that are going on. That was surprising to see because these are the same sort of developments that have happened here about fifty years ago. But they saw it as an unstoppable machine that will devour the whole world and we need to stop it somehow. That's what you tended to feel there.

**FWK:** But we started it. This entire machine has started in Europe. In some courses of mine I talk with students about the fact that up until

1850 the scale and the rhythm and the way in which human beings are in the world is not really a problem. There is violence everywhere, I mean nature is violent, but since the 1850's we are in a process of acceleration, which is beyond anything we can compare it with. And if you take a look at what's happening in China, it's beyond anything ...



Wouter Osterholt.

**EU:** And this growing power.

**WO:** And the decrease of power in America. It's a really interesting moment to both go to China and the States. To see how they deal with the change in power. And also how people talk about it.

**EU:** Yeah in this lecture we attended there were these American architects that claimed that China didn't have any culture.

**FWK:** [Laughs loudly.] That's bizarre, very funny.

**WO:** 'It's a country without culture.' No, they were referring to the situation that there're a lot of foreign architects working in China who built all the famous buildings. China is like a blank canvas, architects can built whatever they want. But then the speakers at the conference started to think about the reason why China doesn't have architects themselves and why in all this time culture is so restricted. And that during communism the individual creativity wasn't flourishing. So then they concluded that they didn't have a culture.

### III Spinach Potato Gnocchi

[Esmé brings in the main course: spinach potato gnocchi with carrot, saffron and grilled pepper sauce, orange, fennel and courgette mix, and marinated aubergine. On the side a jerusalem artichoke salad with radishes and olives topped with pistachio nuts.]

**EU:** Wow.

**FWK:** Wow, beautiful.

**EV:** Here is some parmesan cheese for the gnocchi.

**EU:** Okay.

**WO:** Beautiful.

**EU:** Yeah, it's beautiful.

**FWK:** I don't think it is a matter of having no context, it's just a matter of speed. Of course culture there is, in Chinese architecture. You simply can't scope with the speed with which ...

**WO:** No, but it is also because of their education system. There are no good architecture schools. And the government didn't tolerate a lot of free education and free creativity. In that sense they wiped out culture, so that's why they say there is no culture.

**EU:** But that is also a culture, that is part of the culture.

**FWK:** Right.

**WO:** A few weeks later, at the same conference, Jiang Jun, the editor of an urban China magazine showed all these examples of social design. How people without financial resources make a city their own and how they try to adapt their lives to their conditions.

**EU:** Like the toilets. They're used to squatting above the toilet, so they added platforms to the sides of western toilets, so you can still squat.

**FWK:** [Laughs] Great!

**WO:** They did that also because they didn't have the money to clean the toilets everyday. So they got filthy, they needed to stand on it which proved to be difficult, so they invented these platforms for people's feet. He showed all sorts of playful and creative manifestations. We also saw these things in Cairo, but it seems as if you can find much more of that in China.

**EU:** I don't think much more. But he catagorised it in a very interesting way.

**WO:** But that's part of culture, that's part of human creativity.

**EU:** Of course it has a lot to with the transfor-

mation from communism to capitalism where you see people who have to deal with these old circumstances in a new way. So they start to invent new things.

**WO:** Eet smakelijk. (Bon appetit.)

**EU:** Yeah.

**FWK:** Yesterday I was talking to one student of mine who told about his going to Beijing last year and how he had made friends there. I asked: "What do you talk about with young Chinese students, of 20 say?" Most students do not know what the Tiananmen uprising meant, they don't know it. A broadening of the sensibility is important in the sense of getting to know a history, to be able to talk to the students and say: "This happened on the Tiananmen square." The fact that you know it is already a broadening of sensibility. So there is something in the process of modernity that destroys this ability to ... [Pause] Interesting how in art there is this increasing obsession with archives on the one hand whilst on the other hand you see artists looking for *live* narratives in urban spots that are being threatened. The preservation of documents and artefacts versus the live narrative of somebody telling a story. The moment you see artists move to a threatened spot in cities that is also, almost always, where something is disappearing as a living collective thing. Where you would once, really, have an embodied collection of narratives, you will now have documented narratives.

**EU:** You mean the sense of history with artist going to places that are not existing any more.

**WO:** And the re-enactments.

**EU:** Yeah. Teaching the other. But then it is really hard to communicate because it's not existing any more so the public doesn't relate to it.

**FWK:** That's troubling isn't it?

**EU:** Yeah, it is. And still it's important.

**FWK:** Very important. Perhaps art, in a sense, has never been so marginal. Unimportant. I mean, who cares? And in another sense art has never been so political. I don't mean concerning politics in an immediate sense, but the movement of art towards these areas that are disappearing, that are being destroyed, or destroyed in order to be re-developed or renovated. I would say that's interesting. Even if it seems to appear to be futile. Do you ever



have the sense that what you do is futile?

**EU:** Yeah, of course. But I think that every artist is struggling with that.

**WO:** That's why we make art. Art is shaped by this question of how to make it important, how to approach people, how to create platforms that can communicate. It's only about designing these sort of pragmatic platforms, even without being concerned about the content. But of course we try to deal with the content because that's where it gets interesting.

**EU:** Oh, Esmé het is zo lekker. (Oh, Esmé it's so tasty.)

**WO:** Ja, het is erg lekker, erg goed. (Yes, it's very tasty, really good.)

**EV:** Ja? Fijn. (Yeah? Great.)

**WO:** So a lot of the effort goes into the process of developing and designing platforms in order to have this sort of free space in which there's a sensibility or an understanding. And just a good communication which is clarified from a lot of noise and distraction and a lot of disinterest, right?

**EU:** [Pause] Yeah sorry I was like, a little ...

**WO:** ... thinking about the food. Yeah, that's good.

[Elke laughs.]



Wouter and Elke wheeling the MacMansion through Victorville.

**FWK:** The boring question would be: "How does that relate to art's institutions, hence politics?" What starts to interest me more is how do you *do* that?

**EU:** How do you get the public interested, or how do you communicate?

**WO:** Oh, we're back to aesthetics.

**FWK:** Right.

**EU:** That's why we made the maquette and why we pushed the little MacMansion through the streets.

**WO:** I think in our last projects there was, for

us at least, a rediscovery of the aesthetic.

I think this can communicate so directly.

**EU:** It can convince people to get involved.

**WO:** Yeah, directly. Without doubt. When it's beautifully made: "Okay, I'm in!" It's really easy that way to get something across.

**EU:** Yeah, it's very powerful.

**WO:** It's a first layer and then you can play with other, more subtle layers. It's not all about the crying gypsy. It's more than that. But it's powerful.

**FWK:** How do the two of you talk about the aesthetic quality of your work?

**EU:** Uhm, I don't know.

**WO:** It's always through field study, through taking a lot of pictures, through being in the space you want to work with and talking to people.

**EU:** But we're making choices of course.

**WO:** A lot of the time it's not so much related to talking. It's about the feeling as well.

**EU:** When we made this little MacMansion for Victorville we started with collecting all these images from websites of real estate agents. We found images on the websites of banks of miniature houses held by hands with the slogan 'Your home is in our hands.'

**WO:** These are the real estate agents who are offering the houses. We thought it was a beautiful metaphor because it's still in their hands. It's still in the hands of the banks. The banks are the organisations that are now taking the houses back.

**EU:** And then there are also the metaphors of the crisis. So you see houses made out of dollars or houses with locks on it. First we were thinking to use these symbols but then these are moments of making choices. Because we thought: "Okay, if we use these symbols people are not free to talk about something that is maybe not directly related to what's happening in Victorville but maybe equally important. And I think that if we had been walking around with a red house that's so obviously about crisis then people would only talk about that subject. And now we also have people talking about burglars.

**WO:** Or a real estate agent who was making a commercial saying it's such a good time now to buy a house. Everybody is fleeing out town but the prices are so cheap so she was making an advertisement. In designing a platform like this, it's interesting for us to get to a certain openness in the work itself which speaks to a

lot of different people with different interests. But I don't know what kind of words or terms we use in order to come to this design.



Elke interviewing in Victorville.

**FWK:** I think it's very interesting. What you are describing now, I would say, is that all the moves that you made, before the actual work ... Because I have also been looking at these pictures and again the pictures themselves work. Also in terms of scale and material. So why do you use the material, the colours, why this size? How did you come to decide it? It's so incredibly important.

**EU:** I think a lot of these answers come afterwards. A lot of these choices are based on intuition.

**WO:** Yeah, that's why we are artists really. It's the feeling.

**EU:** And then you say: "Oh wow, this is really great because now we made a house and all these people are living in houses that are way too big and we made a small house and suddenly the people are big." But that is something that comes afterwards which can then be used in the description of the work.

**FWK:** Perhaps I'm asking for something that kind of escapes definition. But then that in itself is an important thing to notice.

**WO:** Yes.

**FWK:** Because that would be, possibly, the spot where there is the opening of the political.

**WO:** Yeah. I always describe the artistic process as a really magical process in which you are at the same time trying to define things that you don't need to define it because otherwise it's getting harder and harder. So that's a really difficult tension between these three things. There is a need to constantly define the steps you've taken otherwise you lose yourself in endless repetition of the same theme. For me

it's important to work together because communication with Elke is the first step in trying to find definitions for the things we are doing.

**EU:** Yeah, we choose to collaborate; to define what is undefinable. We don't speak about a lot of choices.

**WO:** But in the end it's pretty clear. In the end everything can be explained and reasoned. But it is through a game of adaptation and implementation of ideas we had beforehand.

**FWK:** How did you get to Victorville?

**EU:** Well, that is not a very complicated story. We were invited for an artist residency in Los Angeles. We were supposed to make a work in Los Angeles based on our experiences of the city. We wanted to limit ourselves. We were walking through Los Angeles and we saw all these houses and we thought: "Okay, but what's behind these facades?" Because you only see the facades with the green lawns and you don't see any life.

**WO:** The whole city is a manifestation of the private space. Like the whole suburb idea; everybody has their own castle which is fenced off. But you don't see the private life that takes place inside of these houses. We were attracted by what's inside these houses. We were walking down the streets and we saw a lot of signs for open houses. The real estate market organised visiting days where you can walk in the house and see the interior. So we were doing this and having interviews with these real estate agents.

**EU:** But then there were these real estate houses were people were actually still living in. They were completely staged. They were not personal at all, so you still were looking at a facade. And then, by coincidence, we came by a house that was a foreclosure and this foreclosure was more personal than the other houses that were staged. Though there wasn't any furniture in it, it was completely empty. But you saw a broken mirror or ...

**WO:** You saw that the family was in a rush to move out. They'd heard by the bank: "Okay, by tomorrow you have to be done." And they were in a rush and they took everything out and you saw everything, you saw the family running out with all their stuff and their belongings.

**EU:** You saw the outlines of closets.

**WO:** And in this stage the real estate agents were standing and they were selling the house. That was an interesting image for us. And Victorville is one of the most heavily struck places in the US by the real estate crisis. One out of

three or four houses is empty. We were interested in this because of its magnitude.

**EU:** We started to read about foreclosures and we figured out which places are heavily struck by this real estate crisis. And Victorville was one of them.

**WO:** So it was basically a good metaphor to use for the city. It symbolises a lot of other cities.

**EU:** We saw in the news that there were newly built apartments and the contractor got bankrupt. So the newly built houses, that were not completely finished yet became bank owned. The bank decided not to finish building the houses because there's no market. So they left the houses the way they were and they got fined by the municipality everyday because these houses were not finished and not for sale.

**WO:** And they were being squatted and the windows were broken.

**EU:** Then the bank decided that it was cheaper to demolish these houses than to sell them or find an alternative use for them. Sixteen houses.

**WO:** This was in the news nationally, even internationally, you could see it in every news programme. It was a symbol of the crisis: "They're even tearing down newly built houses with everything in it." Some houses had a complete kitchen, a whirlpool ...

**FWK:** Would you call this a sign of the crisis or a sign of the system?

**WO:** Both. It's absurdity of the system, that it can come so far.

**EU:** The crisis is a consequence of the system.

**FWK:** Is it just a symptom of the system?

**EU:** Yeah.

**WO:** In the beginning, in Holland, we were doubting whether we could call it a crisis. We were talking about that you couldn't see any of your friends having a real crisis. But there you could really see the crisis. And we had heard of the economic crisis even before we went to LA and we already had in the back of our minds that we wanted to see an image that relates to this. I want to know what it means to people. In Victorville you could definitely feel this. It started there in 2006.

**FWK:** When I was talking to Willem Schinkel, who is an sociologist in Rotterdam, he stated that in the last two decades, artists have become more and more sociologists or social engineers. Of course Willem reflected on his object, but how would that reflect on himself? What have academics become? I would say ac-

ademics have become more and more labourers. We work in a factory and we produce. We produce articles and books.

**EU:** Do you feel like that yourself?

**FWK:** I think it's a quite adequate description of what's happening.

**WO:** Why?

**FWK:** We work, in general, within the academic machine, although there is a difference between the scientists on the one hand and scholars within the humanities. If you take a look at philosophers, literary scholars, art historians and so forth, they are marginalised more and more if you consider them in the context of the way in which the government is distributing the money. Huge flows of money are going to scientists who are working on new things that will work. But the reflection on what's happening at the moment is completely marginalised and industrialised. The question is not what you are saying, the question is how much did you publish. That's the only question that, literally, counts.

**WO:** The production.

**EU:** Yeah, but in a way that's also what's asked of us.

**FWK:** Interesting.

**EU:** How much do you exhibit and where? How busy are you?

**FWK:** How does that correspond with the more sociological approach? Is there a way out of the problem? Or is that simply where the money is?

**EU:** No. Well, there are different ways of getting money as an artist. In the last years we did a lot of residencies. This gives you the possibility to produce work instead of exhibit something that you already have produced.

**WO:** But he asked a different question about why artists are getting more socially orientated. Is it because of the financial system?

**FWK:** Or is there something that artists sense: "We have to be there at the moment."

**WO:** I don't know. If I look at our own work it goes hand in hand. But it was also an escape out of the institute into society. There you deal with other powers that do not only relate to the politics of the institute.

**FWK:** So, when you were in Cairo or in Los Angeles, are you considered to be an artist by the people you work with?

**WO:** Do you mean the ones of the institute?

**FWK:** No, no.

**WO:** Or the people we meet?

**FWK:** Right, yeah.

**EU:** In Cairo definitely. But not in Victorville. In Victorville everybody said: "You should make a business out of this!" [Laughter]

**WO:** Yeah, they saw us as businessmen. They wanted to buy it.

**EU:** "Oh, you're artists? [Disapproving mumble.]" I think it also has to do with the appreciation of art within society. In Cairo, artists who are really good at hand craft are highly appreciated. They're like, 'phieuw!' [Zapping sound], touched by Allah. And in Victorville they immediately wanted to exploit our work commercially. Which is interesting.

**FWK:** It could also be that they think that's the real art.

**WO:** But it's not so interesting if we are seen as artists, or ...

**FWK:** I'm not sure, I was just asking. You were saying "I want to move outside of the institute."

**WO:** But at the same time I'm using the institute a lot to show documentation and to do presentations. With our work we try to create an image that goes beyond autonomous self interest or narcissistic gesture. And to challenge others to be creative with the design of platforms in which that is possible. Basically this is the old fashioned idea of the minimalist sculptures of Carl Andre and Robert Morris. So it's nothing new, but it's now more implemented in society.

**EU:** And I think it also has to do with the desire to have alternative journalism.

**WO:** That's also what is sometimes said, that journalists became artists and artist became more like journalists. Nowadays they're able to reflect very fast on things that are happening.

**EU:** But not only that. You see a lot of artists who use a certain sensibility of describing phenomena that are happening currently. I think there is this need because in the media it is presented in a flat way. They always bring together the opposites to make it sensational. Nowadays within art you see that they try to catch the story from a different range of perspectives to get a more complete story. So it's an alternative form of journalism.

**WO:** Yeah, that's why they say journalists are getting more like artists because no longer can you trust the image that is presented by the news. Because of all the montages. You saw it with the Olympics, like the image of the footsteps in the sky created by fireworks. This was

done with After Effects or some sort of editing program. You can't believe the images that are shown on the news any more. So therefor journalists become like artists. There is a need for other mediums and other platforms in which transparency of the world and the idea of truth in the world is being broadcasted. And I think this is an important role for the arts.

**EU:** But the 'truth in the world'?

[Laughter]

**FWK:** You mentioned the word.

[Laughter]

**WO:** No, but you try to show how things are. That's what I mean.

**EU:** Yeah, that's not the truth.

**FWK:** Let's address this one better. Do we have a problem as human beings or don't we? Are we simply exploring our possibilities and see how far we can get? Or are you saying: "No, no, no, actually there is a form of life that's more ... true." This is the question we all like to escape.

**EU:** No, but that's the difficulty. This also relates to the limiting of the city and limiting freedom. Uhm, I must say I don't know the answer ... if there's any ... I don't know if there's any truth.

**FWK:** I don't think that is the question, we know there isn't! But suppose there is the more or less true. Is that an issue? Is it something you're struggling with? Do you think it's an important question? Or is it just one of these narcissistic traps?

**WO:** I don't think it's interesting ...

**FWK:** The option of "I'm the one who knows what the truth is. I'm looking for the true. I'm the spiritual guide ..." and so forth.

**WO:** Yeah, that's part of the powerplay that you try to study. I think a lot of organisations or people are having an interest in this feeling of truth and feeling of empowerment within themselves. This creates society and that's something you can study.

**EU:** Yeah, you're always the observer.

**FWK:** Right, so that's kind of ...

**WO:** Do you want to change the structure?

**FWK:** No, actually I'm interested in a very basic question. Do you think there are ways of life that are more true than others?

**EU:** I think everybody has their own truth.

**FWK:** Ah, that would be too easy, I mean ...

**WO:** I think I have different days. On one day I'm more true to myself or the world than on the other day.

**FWK:** Right.

**WO:** There are many influences from a lot of different elements that can disturb the image of truth.

**FWK:** This is not just a basic, but perhaps a major political question. How would you know otherwise what you want to fight for?

**EU:** Yeah, I think it's a sort of question you need to answer for yourself. I think everybody has rules. I have rules, for myself, so...

**FWK:** But you're also trained to have rules ...

**WO:** Yeah.

**EU:** Yeah.

**FWK:** So how do you distinguish between the feeling, or the sense, that there is a life more true than this, our form of life? How do I know, for instance, what is actually behind this 'formula' that I put forward in the email, that people do not have an essence but that they *can* get lost? With respect to that it's not a matter of getting to our true self, but it is a matter of how far you want to get lost. Which is in a sense a paradoxical way of putting it, but I don't know a better way of putting it. I do think that it is an interesting question. If I deal with all kinds of forms of art or literature of which I think they're really interesting, then I sense something, feel something more or less true. Something really touches me, or it hits you, or gets you out of your system in a sense.

**EU:** And that's related to ...

**FWK:** Art and the more or less true, I would say.

**EU:** Yeah.

**FWK:** This is what lies behind the question whether art in our times has too large a burden to carry. We don't have religion anymore, I mean I don't have, perhaps you have, but by and large we moderns don't have. So are we not asking art to do the job of letting us find ourselves. And is that not too big a question?

**WO:** Yeah, luckily there are a lot of different fields within the arts. So it's only a limited field within the arts that's being sentenced to have this obligation.

[Laughter]

**WO:** But I definitely think that this is happening to a certain degree. And if it's good or not I don't know, but ...

**EU:** The dilemma that we spoke about earlier is also in this question. That the thing that you're doing is also being read again. People are reading your work and they interpret it in their own way. One work that gets interpreted

in so many different ways, but they all seem to get their own truth out of it.

**WO:** Yeah, their own interest.

**FWK:** Partly, but I think the other option would be to say that the work of art allows the political opening up of a new possibility. So it's not just, say, people 'occupying' your work for their own interest by interpreting it.

**WO:** Yeah, that would be really sad! That's true.

**FWK:** Actually any good work of art allows the opening up of many possibilities, which I think is a major political potential.

**EU:** Yeah I think so too. Some parts of the work come to exist so much on intuition and you don't know what's going on. I don't think it's a critical thing but it can be a dilemma in a way that you can't predict as an artist how it'll be read.

**FWK:** We're back to aesthetics again. So the aesthetics would be the locus, then, where the major political opening can be ... the potential of the political opening can be found. Aesthetics cannot be brought back, in the end, to one interest, or one position, which is far from saying that it is dis-interested, as Kant would have it.

**WO:** It depends what kind of artwork you make. We now talk about work that tries to create platforms in which people are stimulated to be more sensible with their environment. There are probably artists who make work from the idea that they want to educate, or want to set something across which is one-dimensional. It's limited in the openness or I don't know how to say it but they ...

**FWK:** But why would you still call them artists then?, I mean that's what I do also.

**WO:** They're teachers.

**FWK:** Yeah, that's what I do: teach.

**WO:** But sometimes artists can be teachers. It's a dynamic sort of term, 'artist', they probably do a lot of different things at different times, with different meanings. I just find it hard to say that: "Artists do this and do that."

**FWK:** Right.

**WO:** But I tend to have more interest in artists who're involved with creating a bigger openness in which the citizenry are being motivated to think along and to be actively engaged in the decision making process.

#### IV Classic Lemon Tart

[Esmé serves the dessert. It's a classic lemon tart with warm pears and figs infused in sugary mint-lemongrass water and sprinkled with pomegranate kernels.]



The dessert.

**EU:** Wow!

**FWK:** Esmé, are you joining us, because this is also your ...

**WO:** Yeah, we're going everywhere in this discussion, I think.

**EV:** Then I will also grab myself a dessert.

**EU:** Yay!

**WO:** And ask us questions if you have some. We're really floating around in a lot of different topics.

**FWK:** No. Actually I think it's quite coherent.

**WO:** Yeah?

**FWK:** Yeah.

**EU:** Yeah, I think so too.

**FWK:** We're not going to find solutions but ... Perhaps something that we could address more is this 'reading of the city'.

**WO:** Yeah, you develop tools or ideas how to do it and we develop tools.

**EV:** Yeah, I'm actually interested in how a person, on an individual level, could deal with the surroundings and not feel subjected to the decisions that are created by outside sources, like architects or whoever built these beautiful buildings in Rotterdam.

**WO:** Your own individual input in a system like this.

**EV:** Yeah, when you are, as an individual, living in such a place ...

**WO:** Creative freedom ...

**EV:** What can you do?

**WO:** Run away.

[Laughter]

**FWK:** No there's nothing wrong with running away, actually, no.

**WO:** Leaving the country.

**FWK:** I think that what I liked about one of the examples you gave, was these people using their windows to paint, to paint as far as ...

**WO:** The arm can reach.

**FWK:** What else can you do?

**WO:** But there were many examples of these things that we found. Also like a police officer who was setting fire to a tree in the street. The tree had died and was obviously dead, no green leaves whatsoever and it needed to be removed, so the police officer probably had the task to remove the tree so he was just setting the whole tree on fire.

[Laughter]

**WO:** And this is something you would never see in an over-regulated country such as the Netherlands.

**FWK:** Great, great!

**WO:** But this is probably what we have to do, in order to make it more livable. We're talking about how to make society more livable or more safe.

**EU:** Yeah, kind of like an anarchy, there must be more space for chaotic errors.

**WO:** But more space for these pragmatic creative solutions that are not creative for the sake of being creative, or doing something silly for the sake of being silly, but pragmatically you have to do something. So do it. Don't call somebody from the city hall: "This tree needs to be removed." and then they come with a truck and so on. Just set it on fire!

[Laughter]

**WO:** That's something you can do as an individual.

**FWK:** I think at the moment, if you would do this in the Netherlands you'd be ...

**WO:** You'd be arrested.

**FWK:** Right.

**WO:** Yeah, but let it be. Then you're arrested for a few days. There's a big increasing interest in graffiti, the acceptance of street art. I hate to see street art in the museum, I'm totally fed up with it. But still it shows the importance of the rebellion, the chaos, the need to fight against this over regulation of planning the whole city.



But then you should do it in a more inventive, creative manner and not through graffiti probably.

**WO:** Mooi! Mooi toetje. (Beautiful! Beautiful dessert.)

**EU:** Funny thing is that everything we say about food is in Dutch.

**WO:** Yeah

[Laughter]

**WO:** But what do you think you can do, to answer her question, as an individual?

**FWK:** I think you have to set a goal. You have to define what you're going towards. A lot of the people I know do not, really, set goals. And do I my self? No mistake, I kind of reject the American way of saying: "Okay, you set a goal, you work towards it and then you're successful."

I mean that's not the point. My point is you have to decide. That's the political moment. Not in the sense of what you want to work for, but whose side you want to choose.

**EU:** And how you want to live.

**FWK:** Right. So that's why I said that the reading of the city is ... or any reading is essentially ... essentially political, in the sense that you have to choose with whom or with what or against what am I going to read this environment.

**WO:** Yeah.

**FWK:** I cannot read the city objectively, I have to decide from which angle I'm going to read it. So, for instance, if I read it from the side of plants and weeds, then the city is one big destruction machine. It's nothing else. It's just a destruction machine, it has to destroy everything. It wants to establish itself, and therefore it doesn't want stuff like weeds or rats or whatever.



**WO:** In order to create this mono-culture ...

**FWK:** Right. Hence, if I decide to read the city from that point of view, its space opens up in

entirely different ways and then the question probably is how this relates to my goal. The humble position that I now take is that I'm just going to try to talk to people in presenting them ways to read in a more complex way. That's all. But then I have to have lots of skills, I have to choose where I want to appear, how I want to appear ...

**WO:** For whom, yeah.

**FWK:** Anyway, that's the goal I'm working towards. So everything I do from this moment onwards is orchestrated by that goal. I want to enlarge my own sensibilities, and the sensibilities of people ... of their abilities to read.

**WO:** Yeah, the environment ...

**FWK:** Texts even. If I'm able to teach people how to read texts more sensibly, better, including more histories, more perspectives, then I'm already doing something.

**WO:** Then you're already doing something political? Or ...

**FWK:** Yes, I think so.

**WO:** But there are a lot of different levels in which you can be political. Like the idea that to be an artist is already a political step.

**FWK:** Right. You might have to consider it as a political step, but then you would have to safeguard it.

**WO:** But then what you do would increase the political value in your work. When you start to do something and make decisions that's just a first step. The decision to become an artist is a political choice so you have a certain level of politics within that. As soon as you start making other decisions it can have an increase in this political value, it can be more. That's what I mean. So it's not only like: "Okay I'm political." It's just trying to be engaged on many different levels, right?

**FWK:** If you've decided this, which or what is the political decision? Because only if you've answered this question, can you safeguard your endeavour. So, for instance, if I look at my field of work, I'm threatened more and more by all kinds of institutions that want me to produce. If I say it's very important that I take two hours to teach students how to read a text as sensitively as possible, then the pressure of course is "why do you need two hours?" Or "why would we need that?" Therefore, one of the things I'm going to do is to cooperate with others, for free. I don't charge anything. And then I want to, like, go into a neighbourhood in Rotterdam working with people and teaching them how to

read.

**WO:** But you just ring the door?

**FWK:** No, I'm cooperating with people who know what they want and who have their connections. Then I say: "Okay that's a critical choice, one that will make something possible."

**WO:** So you need to collaborate in a sense.

**FWK:** Right. But the time that this takes cannot be spent on the production of articles, let's say. So that's where I will have to start to make a political choice, which is related to the goal. If I have a clarity of goal, I know how to orchestrate my activities towards that goal.

**EV:** What do you do then when you go into the area? How does it work, practically?

**FWK:** I think in the end this is where aesthetics comes in, again. It's not just the decision to do this because that decision doesn't mean a thing, since if I, kind of, botch up, or do a bad job then I will have been moving away from what I wanted to achieve. So I have to think through what will be the formula that will make it work. I have to do something that is effective, attractive.

**EV:** Like walking around with a house in the city. And what do you do?

**FWK:** For one, I'm spending more attention to the way in which I teach. I want to become a better teacher.

**EV:** How do you do that? Are you not satisfied with how it is now?

**FWK:** I wasn't dissatisfied. But I'm thinking more about the aesthetics of teaching. Which has to do with a whole range of things. Welcoming people, finding them. Are you willing to learn something with me, through me, why?

**WO:** The clothes you wear, your performance. [Laughs]

**EU:** Aren't the aesthetics of teaching very context specific? Within every context another aesthetics is more appreciated.

**WO:** I like the idea of aesthetic teaching.

You can think in terms of your performance with smoke and lights and you're coming in. That would be a surprise, like: "Ooh." Like an LSD trip.

[Laughter]

**FWK:** As I'm interested in the movement of artist going towards sociology, I am interested in wanting to move outside the academy. I'm going into this neighbourhood. I've found partners who said: "We will gather a group of 20 people who are interested and you come and help us and do your trick..."

**WO:** How do you know when people are interested in that? What opens up ...

**FWK:** No, no, that's my hidden... That's your hidden agenda as well.

**WO:** But when I make a work I'm not making it for everyone. I'm choosing a specific audience who I want to engage into the work.

**FWK:** I'm cooperating with an organisation, Kosmopolis Rotterdam, which is interested in getting people from different groups, ethnic and social groups, to talk to one another. So they're specialised in getting people together... And they say to me "Okay, this is the area we're going to. We're going to, for instance, Rotterdam South. These are the people that we know. We think we can get this group of people together. And then you come in and do something with that group." So I'll probably get a group of people, who are not academics but they are interested in some sense, although their motivations may be very different. And then I'll do something with them in order to generate something more. It's a long term agenda. It's not just doing your trick at that moment, it's also working towards something that will grow from that moment onwards.

**EV:** Are you meeting these people again afterwards?

**FWK:** It's a cooperation with OT, a theatre group. I'll be working before and together with them and then they will bring in some actors and do scenes and the people will be invited - which will probably be facilitated because they don't have any money - to go to the theatre. We, kind of, work our way, together, towards something. And this going to the theatre will be a kind of an end point, but also a beginning. Because we hope of course to have done something. They wouldn't have gone there themselves. In a sense it's an old social democratic agenda of getting people to go to the theatre. But it's far more complicated than that. Because I'm going to meet people that I don't know, I'm not sure what's going to happen. So, I stick my neck out, they stick their neck out, and we're going to talk and then something will come out of that. Great. In a sense it's very humble. What is it? It's nothing, in a sense. How can you sell this? "I'm going to talk to people. Give me money." [Laughter] That's why I say: "It's going to be free of any charge."

**WO:** So they're not forced to go to the theatre?

**FWK:** No.

**WO:** You should force them. [Laughs]

They will never go. No, I'm kidding. They will.  
**FWK:** That's my job. In a sense that is the job of the artist as well; to open up a new possibility.

**WO:** That's an interesting thing that we have to deal with in our work as well. Like in the last two projects that we talked about now...

**EV:** Heb je zin in koffie? (Would you like coffee?)

**EU:** Oh, ik niet maar misschien hij. (Oh, not for me, but maybe for him.)

**WO:** Oh, ik wel. (Oh, I do.)

**FWK:** Wat zeg je? (What did you say?)

**EV:** Heb je zin in koffie? (Would you like coffee?)

**FWK:** Ja, lekker. (Yes, please.)

**EU:** Ik hou het bij thee. (I'll stick to tea.)

**WO:** But sometimes the participants who are involved within the projects that we do, think we do it specially for them. For their benefit. I like this idea, that they think we do it for them and in the meantime we also say something about them. I'm still an artist. I try to make a documentary about their life. So there is also an interest socially seen in their lives, their situation and how they deal with their environment. But in your work you only give something away, but what do you get back? What things are you interested in receiving back? Probably you do get things back. What is it? Is there something that you put in articles or in books that you can sell.

**FWK:** I think the same holds for artists. That you do something that you already know. Nevertheless, just today I had a course with MA students in which I developed something that I'm still thinking about. I haven't thought it through yet, I'm just thinking about it. I say to them: "I'm thinking about this. I'm presenting it to you and at this moment I'm not teaching you anything. I'm trying to find out for myself what this is and you can help me with that. So please ... I'll bring it in now, and I'll think about it in the coming week. Perhaps you'll think about it and we will come back to it next week." Accordingly, yes, in a part it's just giving, which is actually the aspect that can make you tired. If you get tired of teaching, it's because you've been giving. But then again, that's your job.

**WO:** But that could be enough.

**FWK:** There's nothing wrong with that. And the fact that you're getting tired, I mean, that's the work. You get tired of working.

[Silence]

**WO:** But I mean there could also be an interest in you for those people in Rotterdam Zuid, that you'll meet in terms of you understanding their culture better.



The diner table setting.

**FWK:** Yes! I'm very interested in this. That's why I would like to move out of the academy. That's why I refuse to give lectures any more in the Netherlands. I know the circles, here. I know how it works. I'm more interested in really meeting people on an equal level. Talking to people will lead to my getting back something that I didn't know beforehand. This is the essence of metaphor as well. You can combine two different words and something else comes out of it that you cannot define exactly. But it's the new thing that you've produced.

**WO:** Yeah.

**FWK:** What's the new work that you are working on?

**WO:** For now a lot of preparations. We're organising production periods.

**EU:** We were actually asked to read the city of Leeuwarden.

**WO:** Quite literally.

**FWK:** Why? By whom?

**WO:** The why question we don't know.

**EU:** By 'Voorheen de Gemeente', that's an art initiative. They asked us to make a project that will infiltrate the public domain. And it must be about text within the city.

**WO:** Quite literally. They're interested in methods that are not directly recognisable as art, but try to be something else. But we still have to figure out what they want exactly.

**FWK:** Do you have any sense why they asked you? What's the use?

**WO:** It's the same thing; trying to make people more sensible to their environment. It's the main reason why people want to have artistic activity within a public sphere.

**FWK:** That's more complicated.

**WO:** Probably the whole meaning of art.

**FWK:** Because you could also use art as just a veil or something that makes Leeuwarden more attractive. "This is where it happens, folks." And then they'll come from all over the Netherlands to quickly co-read the city with you, right?

**WO:** I hope we're not part of a hidden agenda.

**FWK:** The broadened sensibility that relates to reading is actually something rather complicated. It takes a lot of time to get people to really do that, to read, and to incorporate what they do. That's why I was wondering: Who is asking you this? Or what kind of organisation is it?

**WO:** Well, I think this questions also come from somebody who follows our work and is interested in the steps that we are undertaking and tries to give this offer in order to ...

**EU:** ... get us started thinking about something.

**WO:** Yeah, but also in trying to elaborate a bit further on our last step. Because we had a talk about the things that we did and he likes this work within that context. But we have to think about whether it's possible, if it's suitable. But a lot of times we are asked without any specific question. The project in Cairo came without any specific question.

**EU:** Often without any question.

**WO:** So far there is never been an exhibition or an project where we've been specifically asked to do something. We've always been given the card blanche. And that can be annoying.

[Laughter]

**WO:** Like, 'why us?' But I think that's the difference also with science, because you are probably asked for a certain reason.

**FWK:** Yeah.

**EU:** Where we always have to guess.

And then they ask: "Give us a proposal!". And then they want to have it as fast as possible while we don't have any reference. So you need to create your own reference first, which takes a lot of time.

**WO:** And be critical at the same time really from the beginning. To see where the money is coming from, why they're asking us. They operate with a certain agenda as well. Sometimes it is totally fine with me when I ignore the things within their organisation and their own ideas and politics. But I think it is important to know.

**FWK:** Right.

**WO:** But a lot of times there is no real hidden

agenda. It's just art for art's sake.

**FWK:** Because the money is there.

**EU:** With art initiatives, yes. When you're asked by another organisation then there is often a political agenda.

**FWK:** Again it is very interesting how this works in the Netherlands. There is such a lot of money going round.

**WO:** But also to science.

**FWK:** Of course.

**WO:** Do you as a scientist also have to, over and over again, legitimize the funding that goes into scientific research? Because we as artists are constantly being engaged by the public, we are sort of the face of the funding. We need to explain a lot of times why we need money and why we're doing it. And maybe scientists are more hidden away. They don't need their public so much.

**FWK:** Yes, it's more direct. But even then ...

**WO:** Would that be good?

**FWK:** I think so. I mean, it's very complicated. At the moment, what you can sense is the flow of money. We all have the task to teach and to do research, but there is a huge difference between the field of the humanities and the field of the sciences. In the field of the sciences there's much more money coming from industries and so on. But apart from that, the distribution of money is in the hand of one organisation at the moment, NWO [The Dutch Organisation for Scientific Research] which is a semi-government organisation. What you see happening is that they give money to what's useful, of course. They're not going to give money to what is not useful or to what they don't understand. In a sense NWO is a guide, what can be translated as 'the one who won't waste your money, or the one who uses your money wisely'.

**WO:** So they make the decision in the same way as the FBKVB makes the decision.

**FWK:** Right. Just today I applied for ...

**WO:** But should they give the explanation to the people in the street? Or should we, or both?

**FWK:** NWO is deciding who is going to get the money and who's not. Their responsibility is to explain why they're giving the money. I mean there're hundreds of people applying. So why did they give the money to these few? I would be very interested in the audience asking NWO: "Why did you give the money to this project?"

**WO:** But nobody is ever asking.

**FWK:** Nobody.

**WO:** But probably because they don't know.

[The sound of a biscuit tin opening.]

**FWK:** I think this is one of the political problems that we have: The distribution of responsibilities. We live in a society where more and more responsibilities are made diffuse. So we don't know who is responsible for what. You move to a certain level and then they say: "No, no, no it was decided by that person. No, no, it was in cooperation with..."

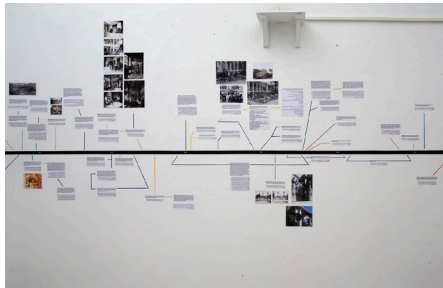
**WO:** So that's also an interesting, important task, to make life more transparent.

**FWK:** Very difficult.

**WO:** By trying to peel all the layers off the onion. In the Cairo maquette we peeled off a lot of different layers in trying to copy the work, but we also presented a whole timeline with archive material that we found in private archives, in studios of photographers and through interviews that we did. We created a sort of transparency of the street.

**FWK:** You must have collected lots of different information. How do you make that transparent again?

**WO:** We just presented it as a formal presentation on the wall.



The timeline of 'Model Citizens'.

**EU:** No, we didn't find a lot of information. That made it a lot easier. Like the archives are not organised and you're often not allowed to visit the archives, because you need permission and getting it takes ages. So the information we got was very limited and someone was working on it full time for two months. The information she got was enormous for over there but it was very limited compared to what it would be here. Because of its limitation it was also a very coherent story.

## Dessert Wine with Apricot and Nut Biscotti's.

[Esmé brings the dessert wine to the table and pours four glasses.]

**WO:** But what was striking to see is how providing information to the people – information that in the West we would definitely know about when it concerns our own neighbourhood, but there they didn't – was an empowering act. This simple form of education which is presented on the wall stimulates a lot of individual thinking.

**FWK:** Could they have found it themselves?

**EU:** We found out that a lot of the news is only published in English, not in Arabic. So you have to know English. Like for example the palace that stood in the neighbourhood was bought by a private owner through corruption. This man has a history of being involved in drug scandals. This news is published in the New York Times or in Daily Egypt in English or French. But it's not accessible in Arabic. We translated everything into Arabic. So the timeline we presented was in both languages. It made a lot of facts more accessible for them that they never knew about.

**WO:** So in order to make them more sensible to their environment we only had to, in this case, present them with this information. So it really depends on the context and the country in which you are, what to do in trying to engage with the citizens, or in trying to engage ...

**EU:** In this case we were making this maquette but then the people started to ask us about the history, and "What's going to happen with the palace?" and "What was it in history?" and we didn't know the facts and we started to ask the people in the neighbourhood and they all told us completely different stories. So we started to collect these stories as well, the myths, and we started to collect at the same time the facts that we got from the archive. And then we made the sound piece with all the stories ...

**WO:** The collective memory.

**EU:** The collective memory of the neighbourhood, told by the people living and working in the neighbourhood. We got the historical facts from the archive and we had these both in our exhibition. There are things that are related to each other and also are contradicting each other. And we don't know what the truth is.

**WO:** We tried to create some sort of tight community with the maquette. It became a defined area in space and time. These people were part of the project and they became more clearly a community and I think that's the importance of the work, or at least interesting to see how you can do that. Within a year you can create a community which is more aware of itself. Of course it already was a community but not so clearly defined. They now know more about their own place in history. They now know more about all the other myths. About the palace in the street and about the dreams and hopes of all their friends.



At the opening of 'Model Citizens' in Cairo.

**EU:** I could write a book about it, almost.

**WO:** Yeah, it creates a stronger relation between the people with their own environment. And therefore it makes them more political, it makes them more aware of changes, it makes them stronger in fighting against certain problems they may face in the future.

**FWK:** Is that your aim then?

**WO:** Yeah, I think so. Creating social platforms in order to empower citizens. Yeah.

**FWK:** Is empowerment the issue then?

**WO:** Yeah, and they can decide for themselves if they do it better or worse, that's not up to us. So in the example of creating a Kentucky Fried Chicken, it's not up to us to say what they need to do. But it's just providing them the tools.

**FWK:** Or the energy.

**EU:** The energy. I think it's more about that. You're empowering them by putting energy in something, a tool with which they can participate fully. They can get involved and they can't hurt themselves by getting involved directly.



And this creates a certain energy that's purely empowering but it's not striving for the better because then you have get the question: "Power to which people?" Because they all have different ideas and different interests. The thing is by creating this tool, the ideas that come up aren't only positive, it's like a monster as well. Also the problems and the clashes between people become more visible, and its more easy to have a conflict within the community. So it's not only defining the community as a community, it's defining also the conflicts within the community.

**WO:** Because sometimes it's better to let things cover it, not reveal the truth. For example with the corruption scandal and with the owner of the palace. A lot of people get upset when they find out about it, but there's nothing they can do about it. We still present them the fact, we present the newspaper and translate it. So it's not so much for the better. At the same time it's like a social experiment almost. That's kind of a dangerous term.

**FWK:** Why?

**WO:** Social experiment? [Laughs] It sounds scary! You make use of people, in a certain sense. But I believe you can make social experiments in a careful manner. We constantly had to find ways not to make arguments. But that's with every work, it's not only in Cairo. It's not because of the different culture, the different setting and the different countries. In every work you have to be respectful with the people you work with. It's the same for you [Addressing Esmé], you have to make the food in a certain way. You could also make something completely different, like horrible food, and then it'd be totally different. There's always a need for a certain respect. That's the aesthetics of your work, the really good food which makes something possible.

**FWK:** I wouldn't have anything against the term social experiment. The question is to what kind of experiment do you confess yourself.

**WO:** What do you mean? Has what you are doing in Rotterdam south become a social experiment as well?

**FWK:** Just next week I'm going to give a lecture in Köln about the Seventeenth century form of experimenting. It connects to the telescope. At the time, the beauty of the telescope was that, if you moved your eye in front of this glass, you would be in a different world, but also in a different texture. And if you take a

look at the experiments that were done at the time – most of the time by one or two people trying to find out something, very attentively, very concentrated – what happened was that they found themselves in another texture. They were trying to find out: "Where am I? What am I doing and what's happening here?" And that's what I define in this lecture as a basic form of theatricality: "What's happening? Who's doing something? What am I? Am I the actor or the audience?" It concerns a heightened form of awareness, which is completely incomparable with the general way experiments are being done in the sciences nowadays.

**WO:** Was the telescope changing the perspective they saw?

**FWK:** If I call it theatricality it means that you're implicated in the experiment that you're doing. So you're not entirely sure whether you are the director, the actor or the audience. It's a bit dream-like, and this instability is I think what art can be about. If you call it a social experiment, it would be that.

**WO:** Yeah, part of it.

**FWK:** You, as well, are thrown into some kind of situation – "Ok, where am I?" – which is completely different from the way in which the sciences in our moment in time generally operate.

**EU:** I think also that if you call it a social experiment this counts for both parties. It's for the participants and for the artists as well. So you're not using them, but you're using yourself as well, and the situation in which you are totally innocent, integral.

**WO:** In that sense it's a performance. You give something away which is part of your culture but also your identity and your role as an artist. That's an important part of the mutual agreement you seem to make, in this case in Cairo.

**EU:** In Cairo it was very obvious. If we had a day off, or didn't feel so well, we walked to our studio like this like [Elke mimics walking slowly while looking down to the ground.] And then as soon as we entered the street we had to say hello to everyone, we needed to laugh with everyone, have daily conversations with your tea or coffee, and make the same jokes everyday, and that was part of the ... the Truman show.

**FWK:** And all the time you had translators at your side or what?

**EU:** No. We could do the ritual things. It's an easy culture in a sense, people look in your eyes and make a lot of gestures. So even though you

don't speak the language you can easily communicate.

**WO:** What's the time?

**FWK:** Ten past ten.

**WO:** Because I also have to drive back.

**FWK:** We've been talking for three hours.

**EU:** Intensively. Nice!

**WO:** We've been in a lot of different places, different topics.

**FWK:** So the idea that I'm working on is that what you would call theatricality in the seventeenth century has now changed into a different, dominant model, which is the model of the game. We have to decide: "Okay, where are we? What's the game? What are the rules? I'll have to stick to the rules and then I'll do that." If this is the case you, kind of, have to break the rules. People are living here and they have their rules, and then somebody enters and you're not sure, anymore, what the rules are. Which might get us back to the model of theatricality. We have to sense what's happening: "Who are these people? Where did they come from? Are they here to act?" And that's far more close to the political moment than the game model. It's very hard in terms of the game model to get the the political moment. Because the question will always be: "What are the rules?" When you say you want to change the rules, then you have to change the game.

**WO:** Do you mean like you have to rewrite the software, in the example of a computer game.

**FWK:** Right. "Stick to the rules! You entered it ..."

**WO:** But in real life we are able to break the rules, far more easily than in a computer game. I can set fire to a tree, and then run away.

[Laughter]

**FWK:** But that's immediately what will annoy people in our society.

**WO:** That there are all these people breaking rules. Therefore new rules are put in place. So you get a tighter and tighter society because people break rules, that's the big paradox of the law society.

**FWK:** Which means that in the end you will get to an apolitical society because we only need ...

**WO:** Yeah, you don't have to make decisions anymore and decisions are made for you. How to engage people in the decision making processes? That's the question in these very over-regulated times. That's probably the conclusion. Did we find answers? Setting fire to a

tree?

**FWK:** In a sense, yes we did find answers. I think a major force in trying to find answers is a renewed focus on aesthetics. Suddenly people have to think "Wait a minute! I'm somewhere else now, I'm somebody else now. How did that happen?"

**WO:** And then being aware that all other media uses the same tactics as the arts to catch the awareness of consumers.

**FWK:** There's the aesthetics of advertisement of course.

**WO:** Which is a pain in the arse for artists!

[Laughter]

**FWK:** I think that could be a major reason why the arts moved towards intervention, anthropology, sociology ...

**WO:** But advertisement came along with guerrilla advertising and...

**EU:** So you should study that as well.

**WO:** You can be aware, of course there's a big big difference.

**FWK:** I think also for scholars you have to be a flexible scholar. You can't say: "I'm just doing this." in humanities anymore. So you have to be able to move and to think: "If this is the situation that I'm in now, then I'll choose that." So advertisement in itself is not despicable. You have to see what it's doing in relation to what. You can use it at times.

**WO:** Or copy it. It becomes a tool as well. So that was the conclusion?

**FWK:** Yeah. Wij gaan gewoon stoppen. Wij gaan over op Nederlands tanden. Wij zijn moe aan het worden dus ... (Yeah. We're just going to stop. We're using Dutch. We're getting tired.)

**All:** Ja! (Yes!)

## Colophon

This conversation was recorded on 25 September 2009 as part of the *Zicht op Zalmhaven* project.

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*Zicht op Zalmhaven* is a single-table restaurant to which guests are invited for a three course meal and an interdisciplinary conversation. The invitees are working in the fields of art, philosophy, social science, cultural theory and history.

I invite the guests on the basis of their work and research. The subjects of the conversations have come forth from questions I deal with in my own artistic practice. ‘Autonomy, Agency and Free Will’, ‘Gesture, Display and Body Language’, ‘Self-Organizing Structures’ and ‘Reading the City’ are amongst the topics that will be discussed. The idea for the project developed from a personal desire for conducting research that is driven by curiosity and sharing. The guests share their research, interests, and questions through conversation and I share by preparing a dedicated meal and its setting.

I think that conversation creates a space where new ideas can emerge through the exchange of thoughts and in the unexpected reply the other can give. With the meetings in *Zicht op Zalmhaven* I hope that new perspectives on a given subject can come to exist that feed back into the research of the participants and other interested parties.

Esmé Valk