MIDDELHEIM Museum

RIA PACQUÉE
THEY ARE LOOKING AT US, WE ARE LOOKING AT THEM

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Press release

#RiaPacquéeMiddelheim

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RIA PACQUÉE
THEY ARE LOOKING AT US, WE ARE LOOKING AT THEM

Ria Pacquée (B, 1954) has been researching the concept of "identity" since the 1970s. She does this using her own body as a tool: via performances and body art, as well as through recent installations and video works. From her position as a performer, she takes a central position in her work - in front or behind the camera - without it becoming biographical or personal. She sees identity as an open and therefore dynamic construction in constant dialogue with the outside world. Pacquée is an outsider, she is only too happy to escape categorisation and its expectations. The project undermines the seemingly unchanging concept of identity in various ways.

This exhibition is a larger museum presentation in Belgium since a while. The Middelheim Museum is placing the work of Pacquée in an international contemporary sculpture context. The project not only contains new sculptural installations, a residence, and performances by the artist herself, but also a performance programme with guest artists. Ria Pacquée not only challenges her own body, but also that of the visitors and artists in and around her project. Never before has an artist been literally present in the museum for so long. Her residency is therefore the chance to see her live, because her performances are intuitive, direct and ephemeral.

1/ (artistic identity) no solo

Ria Pacquée's favourite position is that of the outsider. Using various strategies, she manages to circumvent expectations and maintain her autonomy:

- Ria Pacquée escapes the spotlights associated with a solo exhibition by inviting other artists to participate. On the occasion of the exhibition Joëlle Tuerlinckx' *Le Tag (200m)*, created for Skulptur Projekte Münster 2017, will be recreated. Pacquée's work also engages in a dialogue with work from the collection of the Middelheim Museum by Luc Deleu, John Körmeling and Louise Lawler. It illustrates her participatory attitude and the importance of dialogue. However, she is solitary in her own work; the constantly present figure who we look at or who makes us look, here and now.
- Ria Pacquée escapes eternity by producing difficult-to-collect and ephemeral work. She does this by working without scripts, rehearsal or recording, and thus her actions live on in our imagination: they become something collective.
- Ria Pacquée escapes the rules of the art world by allowing her work to evolve organically, free of categorisation (photography, video art, performance, etc.). Moreover, she prefers to work in and with public space, instead of in the privacy of the studio. The objects and situations she incorporates in her work (often literally "plucked" from public space) are typically mundane, and they speak directly to us; as a result of which, the artist automatically disappears into the background.

In addition to a series of sculptural and interactive installations, Ria Pacquée also develops a

performance program in this exhibition structured according to the months:

- In June she will be in residence on the the little island in the Middelheim pond for 30 days. Pacquée will use the residency to observe and perform seemingly small and unobtrusive actions or exercises in the park. Her role is ambiguous here too: the viewer will wonder whether she is a visitor or an artist. At the same time, the water keeps us, the real visitors, at a safe distance.
- Every Sunday in July and August, a performance will take place. Either by Ria Pacquée, or by Suchan Kinoshita (JP, 1960), Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen (PH, 1970), Minja Gu (KOR, 1977) or Hori Tsubasa (JP, 1976). Just like Pacquée, these artists have a practice that transcends categorisation (such as music, theatre, art, gastronomy, etc.) in a hyper-personal and performative manner.

2/ (cultural identity) non-western

Starting from observations in her own street, the non-western has increasingly become a point of attention in the artistic practice of Ria Pacquée. In Antwerp, more than 50% of the population currently has a migration background. Who are these people and how do they deal with their non-western background in a Flemish city? What mutual influences are there? It is this encounter with the other that feeds the practice of Ria Pacquée. According to the artist, our identity is renewed each time we come into contact with others. According to her, we never have a single identity. In times of growing resistance to “the other(s)”, it is particularly important to think beyond the principle of identity as a closed and unambiguous system.

This vision explains the free use of cultural elements and symbols in her body of work. She seeks the potential of cross cultural connections by questioning the boundaries that exist between men and women, the individual and the group, the religious and the secular, the east and the west, the artist and the public. Travelling has become an artistic strategy for Ria Pacquée over the past twenty years. Some of the works in the exhibition, such as *The sun is moving, the clock ticking, the earth sinking* and *Public Speaking Apps*, are inspired by registrations abroad. When Ria Pacquée uses non-western elements in her work, similarities rather than differences become visible. Cultural ownership or appropriation today often leads to discussions about authenticity and authorship, but the process is a fundamental way of achieving exchange between different cultures. Thus, through appropriation, a cultural transformation can ultimately come about. The artists invited to the performance section also incorporate this cultural exchange into their practice.

They are looking at us, we are looking at them.

3/ (physical identity) not personal

The body always plays an important role in the works of Ria Pacquée. Sometimes before, sometimes behind the camera, the body of the artist is the working instrument, just as a sculptor “tackles” the clay. The body itself forms the boundary between the individual and the outside world, and at the same time it is a medium through which the artist crosses physical, social and geographical boundaries. In that respect, the body is active and has “agency”. This means it is not a passive object, but capable of doing something, of changing something. The body can, for example, “perform” the concept of gender by wearing men’s clothes and behaving like a man every day: the body becomes “man” in this performative reality (see philosopher, Judith Butler). For Ria Pacquée, by the way, not only the body has agency, but also the other: the other is not a passive object, but an active subject who engages in a dialogue with us and has the potential to realize change.

Ria Pacquée manages to develop a universal image through her own body to which each of us

can relate. If she herself appears in her work, it is in disguise or as an abstract representation of herself or the other and therefore, potentially any one of us. In that respect, her work is neither personal nor impersonal. Man, woman or anything in between can identify with it. The work is not about her but about us. Watching and being watched evokes something physical and brings about an emotion.

On her island, Ria Pacquée feels safe in her self-chosen, non-conformist position of outsider. At the same time, she is also taking on the role of archetypal trickster: a free bird who can question the established order and thereby get things moving. It is remarkable how some of her early works already address societal challenges that define the debate today, such as climate, gender and migration. Ria Pacquée continues to consistently place certain themes on the agenda from her perception of changing reality. This determination is more important than a possible message: her body of work does not disapprove of us, but inspires us to be who we are and to be courageous and to stand with our two feet on the ground.

RIA PACQUÉE IN 5 POINTS

1. RIA PACQUÉE IS A CITY DWELLER

Ria Pacquée was born in Merksem in 1954. She has been living and working in the North District of Antwerp – one of the most multicultural and challenging neighbourhoods in the city – since the 1980s.

As a young woman in the late 1970s, she stood in the middle of an art scene that ventured into the emerging performance art, under the influence of the United States and Germany. She was never trained as an artist, but she moves in the same circles as artists such as Luc Deleu, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, Guillaume Bijl, Guy Rombouts and Danny Devos. They meet at numerous exhibitions, lectures and actions held in Antwerp, the artistic breeding ground of the late 70s. After the flourishing avant-garde in Antwerp around the Wide White Space gallery in the 1960s, the ICC (International Cultural Centre) programs world-class artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark, Ana Mendieta and James Lee Byars in the 1970s. When the punk movement erupted, artists started to explore the limits of performance as an art form in which they experienced unknown freedom.

For her first action (in the early 1970s), Ria Pacquée waited twelve hours at the final stop of the Antwerp tram network. But she also travels the world from the beginning and performs in New York and Paris, while continuing to use Antwerp as a base.

The public urban environment is her working area, both in Antwerp and beyond. Inspired by her travels, she also shows the fluidity of urban life in her later videos and photos. The cityscape in her

early works is Antwerp, anonymous, but recognisable; in more recent works it becomes more difficult to determine whether the location is in Jerusalem or Bangkok. Her work therefore relates to a more global urban problem concerning migration, the role of women, capitalism and global warming.

2. RIA PACQUÉE IS A PERFORMER

Ria Pacquée is intrigued by performative actions such as religious rituals and the cult of the dead, but also by identity and gender as a constantly repeated reality. She unravels the performative properties of these actions and integrates them radically and consistently in her practice. In addition, she works on her own and her performances always start from her own body, from her observations and her own physical limits.

Some artists from her generation, such as Jan Fabre, evolve towards a more theatrical practice, but Pacquée believes the black box and rehearsals are impossible. In the performances she develops, surrender, intuition and coincidence are very important; therefore, she does not work with a script or a director. The performances are often one-off, and they guard their ephemeral character. The “here and now” are crucial; hence the rejection of registration or documentation.

Her early performance work continues to seep into more recent and more well-known photographic and cinematic works; at certain moments she consciously stands behind the camera instead of in front of it. Yet in the observations she makes and records, you feel the attitude of a performer. Volatile but extremely precise.

3. RIA PACQUÉE IS AN OUTSIDER

Ria Pacquée is an outsider and uses this position as a strategy to escape from normative frameworks, making these escape routes a trademark. By staying outside the customary norms as much as possible, she succeeds in transcending a singular artistic practice. As a young performance artist, she writes the rules herself, like a pioneer in an unknown field. This non-conformist attitude gives her position as a female artist an extra dynamic in relation to the society in which she operates.

We can see how relevant some of her early works are in the light of today's society: whether she examines her own body or embodies alternative characters (Madame (1980s), IT (1990s)), Pacquée confronts us with a universal human being as an exchangeable individual. IT doesn't even have a sex, just bad luck. She unravels the mechanisms of society and makes us, with a smile, think about the systems that we unconsciously use every day. The role of the outsider gives a certain form of vulnerability, but also strength, and has the potency for possible change. Humour is very important for Pacquée. When asked which artists inspire her, she answers promptly that they must have the same humour. Pacquée’s sense of humour makes her work seem easygoing and light, although it captures the fundamental orientation of people in society and the world.

Her self-chosen position of the outsider is not negative or restrictive, but rather a strategy for her to move freely. She wants to preserve her autonomy: she has no assistants, no gallery to direct her, and she displays her work both outside and within institutional exhibition programs. As a free bird, Ria Pacquée is not “just” a performance artist, photographer or film maker; she is a visual artist who works in an enchanting way with found footage.

4. RIA PACQUÉE IS AN OBSERVER

“*A desire to disappear, but to stay physically present*.” (Antony Hudek, 2018)

As an outsider, Ria Pacquée can observe, record and consider to her heart's content. She intuitively collects elements or images from public life and

public space. It is the users of that public space, and not the space itself, that interests her the most. She has a growing and dynamic archive of sounds, video recordings and photos arranged in categories such as twins, circles, groups, colour, people resting, etc. “I'm a sponge. I need to absorb new experiences and environments. I have to be stimulated by other things; otherwise I am completely empty.” (Ria Pacquée, 2018)

Ria Pacquée is not an objective observer: her practice moves between the two opposites of observation and participation. This strategy is very important to her, and comparable to the fieldwork of an anthropologist: participatory observation. She does not participate; she keeps her distance, but at the same time she has to throw herself into the event and the moment, to be able to process it afterwards, and then return it to the same public life. She unravels the reality surrounding her and realises that there is no clear story to tell. The reality is a dynamic construction, and the performative plays an important role in this.

Her work slowly emerges from her observations. These works capture into speech that what is untold. And by doing so, they provoke a connection rather than a division between people, or between people and their world.

5. RIA PACQUÉE IS A TRAVELLER

There is no better way to observe or gain new impressions than from the position of traveller or wanderer. In a unknown environment one is much more alert to sounds, light, people and what is happening around you. From the beginning of the 2000s, Ria Pacquée has been undertaking long work trips that she uses in her art. Of herself, she says she has no imagination and that she can only draw on her own experiences.

The fact that more than 50% of the inhabitants of Antwerp have a migration background, further increases her interest in travel. Pacquée wanted to understand where her own neighbours came from.

When travelling, you suddenly become very aware of your own body thanks to the different food and climate. It is that body that Ria Pacquée uses as a working tool for the long walks on which she makes her observations and recordings, which she calls “streetramblings”. For these walks, the familiar concepts of intuition, surrender and coincidence are crucial. Some work, such as Streetrambling India 2006, are based on one journey. Other works, such as As long as I see birds flying, I know I'm alive, take several years and different journeys, and they take us beyond political and religious boundaries. For her, it is more important what concepts such as politics and religion “do” than what they “are”. And so her work can also be understood to be a mental journey.

You could say that in her work, the body of the artist takes us on an active tour through still and moving images, investigating how we can relate to each other and the globalising world.