

Screening Europe

by Jaap de Ruig

The condensation dripped onto the duvet. I understood that the walls of our second-hand van, bought a month before, would have to be insulated. Worse was to come: one morning, halfway through France, a thick layer of ice would adorn the inside of our windows. In October 2003 Mariët and I left Amsterdam to travel around Europe for a year. Our project was titled Screening Europe. In 25 locations scattered throughout Western and Eastern Europe I would show a selection of my videos. Four screenings had been confirmed. The première was in De Fabriek in Eindhoven. After that the E.N.S.C.I./Les Ateliers in Paris and in the same city a home screening courtesy of the Japanese artist Eizo Sakata. A couple of agreements about possible screenings in Spain and Portugal. A screening in Milan arranged by my Amsterdam gallery owner Maria Chailloux.

We were sort of organized. In haste I had constructed a wooden strongbox to keep my equipment in. With the lid open this box was a double bed. If we wanted to stay somewhere longer, we would rent a flat. I would also shoot new material. Mariët is a writer and would work on a new novel. We had acquaintances right, left and centre who could help us. Dutch embassies could be approached. We would arrange everything via email. 'Pleasure before prestige' was our motto. Much better to have a screening in the studio of an artist for his friends than a stifling atmosphere in an oh so renowned institution. As years go by, I too often see how these institutions with stratospheric pretensions have the tendency to destroy the natural curiosity that people have for art.

I carried all the equipment needed to give a screening anywhere. The only thing required was a white wall (or a bed sheet) and an electrical socket. The screening could be indoors or out. In the introduction I would talk about our trip and explain why I use animals or symbolized animals in my work. Animal life as a detour, a metaphor, a way to ask questions or make statements about la condition humaine. Afterwards there would be the opportunity to discuss matters. Selecting the videos I had kept in mind that the audience would be diverse, so I mixed in serene light-hearted videos with the more extreme ones. Some videos were fragments of installations or of

loops, others self-contained. After a couple of screenings I shuffled, reselected, shortened and extended so a proper balance between content and duration appeared. The 28 videos then formed a homogenous film of roughly an hour.

The difficulty in organizing a screening varied from 'You are not leaving here before you've showed your film,' to the usual hass-les. The art-world prides itself in being progressive, but is in fact afraid of the experimental. Fear of losing respect and standing guides them. On our way through Europe, it quite often happened that gallery-owners or curators who did not know my work, but had committed themselves on recommendations by third parties, came up to me afterwards visibly relieved. They were all of a sudden overly friendly and insisted on further cooperation. In this respect there is little difference between Western and Eastern Europe. Willingness to show something or approve of it, only arrives when others have endorsed it first. In my case that meant that during the trip it became easier and easier to arrange things. When it was noticed on my website that others had preceded them, they dared take a chance. One prestigious(!) venue after another was added to the list.

The screening in Madrid was planned for March 11 2004, but on the morning of that day we heard about the terrorist bombings. I phoned the organization and suggested that maybe under the circumstances it would be better to call the whole thing off. 'No way,' we were told, 'it is going ahead as planned.' That is how we found ourselves on the evening of the eleventh of March in the Art Palace, yards away from the Atocha station that had been hit. Outside flags had been lowered to halfmast, candles flickered and helicopters circled overhead. We did not expect a lot of visitors; two hundred people had just been killed, who would go leave their own home to see video? The room filled up though. The shorts about life and death took on a certain charge. Afterwards everyone stayed to talk, mainly about the attacks. Death was very present that day.

In the Italian south we visited a friend from Holland, Jeltina Schoemaker, art historian and archaeologist. She lives in Alberobello, a town of remarkable round houses with pointed roofs. It was not my intention to show my videos there, but Jeltina took us along to see the local pharmacist who made us meet with the representative of culture. This man proposed we use the Museo del Territorio, a building consisting of a cluster of those same round houses that Alberobello is known for. We planned to have the screening a couple of days later. News spread. That Sunday the museum contained an amalgam of people of different ages and backgrounds,

sitting on each others laps, so large was the turnout. I suspect not many of them had entered the realm of modern art before. It is probably that freshness that made some women in their fifties ask remarkably relevant questions afterwards.

After a screening in the Institute of Contemporary Art in Sofia in Bulgaria a tall heavily built man with hair down to his shoulders approached me. He turned out to be Ventsislav Zankov, an artist admired and feared because of his performances. Once a week he held an evening of discussion in a dark establishment called Hambara, *the Granary*, part of the Red House and related to De Balie in Amsterdam. I was asked to host an evening. Arriving Mariët and I noticed a long queue. 'Probably something else going on here as well,' we mumbled to each other. But no, they were there for the Dutch video artist. Thanks to Zankov Hambara has become a very lively venue where experiencing art goes further than just entertainment. Oh yes, by the way, the thirty euros Zankov gets for the evening is his only source of revenue.

In Chisinau, capital of the Moldovian Republic, we visited the Dutch artist Ron Sluik who lives there with his companion Irina Grabovan, who runs the AoRTa Gallery. Their hospitality was touching. Irina warned us that on purpose she had not advertised the screening. No matter, the gallery was so full that people were standing outside looking in through an open window. Another screening was organized and again the window had to be opened because many people came back and brought others along.

I can easily make a list of inspiring organizers. From Portugal across to Macedonia and up to Finland. People who are not only sympathetic and independently thinking, but who are also the epicentre of a group of equally minded souls.

The Linnagalerii in Tallinn is one of the best spaces for contemporary art in Estonia. Reet Varblane is chief curator. On a friday she heard I was in town. Tuesday next forty Estonians were watching my work.

What amazed me during the screenings was one specific difference in reaction. Moments in the half comical, half tragical vi-deos drew laughter from everyone, but the more extreme videos divided people. One video in particular. The one in which Mariët skins, cuts up, fries and eats a muskrat. A short version of a registration of research Mariët did for her novel *De overstroming* (The Flood). People in France and Germany calmly observed how Mariët's disgust slowly changes into acceptance and even delight in consuming a tasty bit of rat-meat. In the Balkanregion however (where I presume people have seen their grandmothers kill rabbits or chickens) reactions were quite strong. Grown men got up and left, they couldn't handle it. Even

during a short in which a hand plays with toys and a dead mouse, usually illiciting laughter because people realise the irony and empathy, these macho men would turn their heads.

Back home, 25 screenings later, Art Gallery Maria Chailloux organized a festive ending of Screening Europe in the Cultural Embassy of the Lloyd Hotel in Amsterdam. The selection that had travelled Europe could be seen again with four added new video installations. Mariët gave a reading called *Het muzenreservaat* (Sanctuary of the Muses). It was about the discrepancy reigning in the artworld. About the strange arrogance of decision-makers and the need to protect art itself.