



Bik Van der Pol, *Fly Me To The Moon*, 2006  
Piece of moonrock, collection Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

# Past Imperfect

BIK VAN DER POL IN CONVERSATION WITH ANDREW BONACINA



**Rotterdam based artists Liesbeth Bik and Jos Van der Pol have been working collaboratively as Bik Van der Pol since 1995, when they turned their backs on painting and sculpture to develop a more discursive and socially engaged art practice. Whether inviting people to spend the night in a museum to watch Andy Warhol's *Sleep* (beds supplied) or building a fully-functional bookshop in a museum lacking its own, the architectural and social situations engendered by Bik Van der Pol's site-specific interventions provide vital spaces in which to examine the dynamics of cultural production and the structures surrounding the narration of history.**

**Andrew Bonacina:** You have been working together as Bik Van der Pol for over a decade. How did your collaboration begin?

**Bik Van der Pol:** We graduated from the traditional art school system in 1986 and '87 and worked individually for almost ten years – Jos was a sculptor and I (Liesbeth) was a painter. At the time, we were involved with Duende, an artist run initiative here in Rotterdam. In the 1980s there was almost nothing going on in Rotterdam, few galleries of any importance and no interesting institutions, so we decided to get together with a number of other artists and make something of it, organising a programme of exhibitions, discussions and talks. This way of working didn't feel very connected to our individual practices - we went through a process of unlearning what we had been taught at art school - but as a mode of working this seemed much more interesting and vital to both of us.

**AB:** Your work can often be seen as providing a service, of sorts, for the art institution and your roles shift between those of artist and curator. Has this ambiguous space always been something that you wanted to challenge or explore?

**BVdP:** We see ourselves foremost as artists; curating exhibitions or setting up situations where people can attend a film screening or a lecture is just part of our practice. This approach probably comes from the experience of working in an artist-run space and for us it was a very logical step. For example, a bookshop can become an instrument for creating a discursive space within an art space and our projects are about creating opportunities for discussion and interaction.

**AB:** The role and visibility of the studio is a recurrent feature in your work, beginning with your first collaborative piece, *The Kitchen Piece* (1995), in which you built a replica of Jos' kitchen on the opposite side of his apartment. It's a piece that marks a transition from your individual practices and seems key to understanding the rest of your work.

**BVdP:** At the time, we were running guest studios in the same building as Jos' apartment for visiting artists. It was always a very open situation, we had parties every two weeks there and so the private space became a very social, almost public, space where people gathered, cooked and held conversations. Through thinking about the environment itself and how it generated discussion, we decided to copy the most important aspect of this space - the kitchen - in an almost fetishistic way, in order to emphasise this transition in usage. As a space, the kitchen came to embody how things come about; for us it became increasingly clear that while the studio might be the place where things are made, the discussion and development of work nearly always takes place elsewhere.

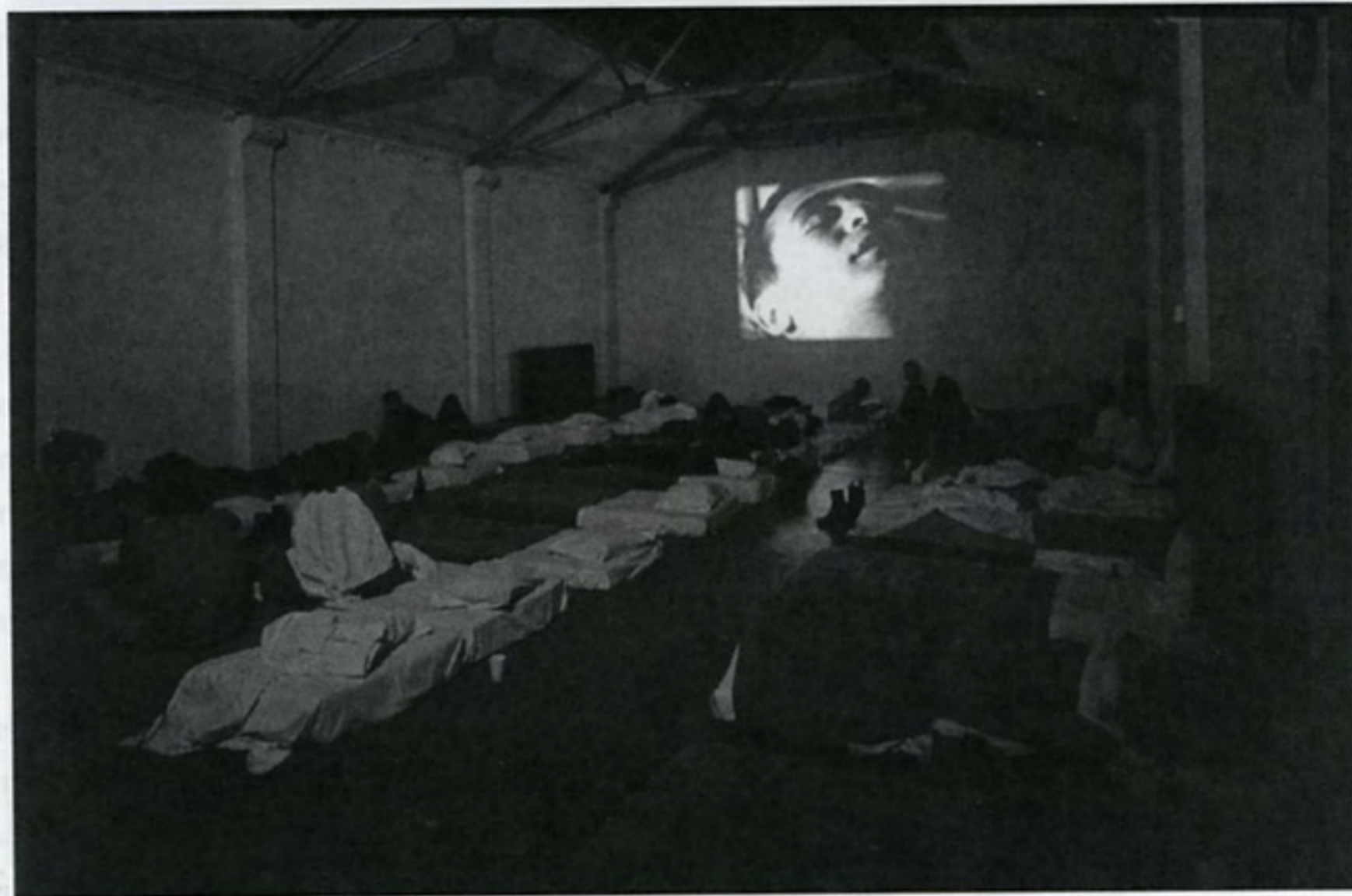
**AB:** *The Kitchen Piece* - alongside other replica pieces such as *The Shower Piece* (1995), in which you built a replica of Arno van Roosmalen's own shower and *The Bookshop Piece* (1996) where you recreated London's ICA bookshop in the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam - articulates the way in which architecture functions as a socially organising mechanism, along with demarcating a physical space.

**BVdP:** Yes, in some ways, these early pieces are about generating performances in which the border between the performative and so-called 'real life' is somehow blurred. These pieces all have the effect of generating a certain type of behaviour or interaction; with the bookshop and kitchen pieces we experimented with this in the context of the museum. *The Kitchen Piece* changed a lot in that context, not formally, but in the way in which people used it. The work had to be integrated into the fabric of the museum so it that it wouldn't simply become a sculptural object that people felt they couldn't enter or use. A friend who was very much involved in the building of the kitchen hosted the piece for the weeks that it was installed in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. He was almost living there and over that time, the public started to behave as though they were visiting him in his kitchen. The shift in the visitors' physical behaviour was very interesting, from typical museum-like behaviour to a more informal, human and physical mode of interaction.

**AB:** Is displacement also key to these replica works, taking something out of context in order to examine both the work itself but also the dynamics of the context?

**BVdP:** It's not primarily the idea of displacement that's important, but rather the act of bringing these pieces in as a constructive critical element that might potentially change something. *The Bookshop Piece*, for example, served to create an environment where people could browse through theoretical (and other) books, something which wasn't really happening in Rotterdam at that time, simply because these sort of books were not available. Today the situation has improved but the availability of this kind of knowledge is still limited.





Bik Van der Pol, *Sleep With Me*, 1997, Duende, Rotterdam. Photo: Bob Goedewagen

**AB:** You've taken the idea of replication a step further in works such as *Office/Lobby Piece* (2002) where dislocation is used in order to explore the differences between two very different art scenes in Germany and Hungary. This was done quite simply by replicating Apolonija Sustersic's design for the lobby of the Munich Kunstverein in a gallery in Budapest.

**BVdP:** *Office/Lobby Piece* came from an invitation we had received in 1999 to set up a residency exchange programme between Rotterdam and Budapest. While visiting Budapest we came across the Studio of Young Artists Association, an important resource of information on the Hungarian art scene after the Wall came down. We felt that as a resource this space needed to become more enabling and stimulating, so we formulated a description of what this space could be, what the demands were from our point of view and how it should function. Some years later, when Maria Lind was appointed director of the Kunstverein Munich, she invited us to participate in her first exhibition there called 'Exchange and Transform (Arbeitstitel)', which dealt with the serious transformation of the structure and dynamics of economy, society and culture, a theme we interpreted in terms of the circulation of ideas, money and space. Sustersic's design for the lobby space at the Kunstverein and Lind's programme for it was (more or less) the same as what we had planned for the space in Budapest. So we created a double of Sustersic's Munich design with artists and architects from Budapest and installed it in the exhibition space

one floor above the actual lobby. It was used by the different artists in the show and at the end of the exhibition the whole thing was shipped over to Budapest.

**AB:** The way in which the audience are invited to interact and participate in your work resonates with current debates around relational practices. How much do you see your work engaging with these ideas?

**BVdP:** It is true that our work often creates temporary communities or opportunities for interaction with others. This happens more explicitly in some pieces, for example in *Sleep with Me* (2002) for which we invited people to spend the night with Andy Warhol's film *Sleep* (1963). It is over five hours long so we provided beds in the space so that people could quite literally sleep with Warhol's film. Here we were trying to renew the situation of how one could look at a film of a man sleeping, since we see this film as an important work and yet few people have managed to watch it in entirety when shown in the viewing context of a cinema. We have tested and realised this piece several times in museums, galleries or artist-run spaces, places usually closed to the public at night. The piece becomes a tool to open up these institutional spaces, like Rooseum in Malmö, CCA in Vilnius and the Tokyo Opera Art gallery, literally, but also spiritually. The piece creates a real sense of community based on this shared experience: people are always quite excited to sleep with this film, in a museum with other people. It generates a blurring of



the public sphere and more private, intimate spaces of experience.

**AB:** These interventions are constructive but to what extent are they also disruptive to the everyday workings of the institution and critical, in their mode of address, of the museum? Are they proposals towards an ideal art institution?

**BVdP:** The works certainly examine the institution and how accepted models have developed. Why would it not be possible to open up the institution at night if that is what is necessary for a work? Still, despite decades of institutionally critical practices, we are always surprised how certain habits become fixed, and in the end, impossibilities. *The Bookshop Piece* was a critique of the fact that knowledge is often not imbedded in the institutional context at all: what is available in museum bookshops is usually directed by economic principles rather than by the wish to create a form of discourse through the material they offer. For the museum Boijmans Van Beuningen this was the case then and it is even worse today, so one may wonder if our piece really caused an awareness of these issues. One cannot always blame the institutions since they are under increasing political pressure to profit financially from their activities and to attract bigger audiences. Still, we feel that they should be the places where, among many other things, knowledge and discourse are produced and shared.

**AB:** In certain pieces of yours there is also a concern with the way in which institutional spaces have developed and changed over the past century, particularly in Northern Europe.

**BVdP:** In works such as *Absolut Stockholm* (2000) we appropriated a billboard we found in New York for an Absolut campaign furnished with IKEA furniture. This billboard, uniting two global players, was the perfect representation of ambiguity in a capitalist democracy. The vodka brand Absolut, was invented and created by the Swedish government to conquer the American market, despite the contention over alcohol in Sweden, as it is today still only available in state-owned shops. Then there is IKEA, playing the world market with a philosophy that is rooted in the rural, peasant culture of Sweden – the idea that making something with your own bare hands makes you a better human being. Advertising alcohol in the public realm is not possible in Sweden so placing the reconstruction of this billboard in the museum, which is (according to us) a public space, created a springboard for discussion around the Swedish social democratic model, its ambiguities, its values, its gains and losses. The project involved a series of meetings in various architectural spaces of the past century, spaces that were, as meeting places, at the very heart of this democracy. They were the discursive spaces that made it happen. Today, these spaces are increasingly taken over by commercial ventures like H&M, Starbucks and so on. With this project we were able to raise questions about how they might still function today and how they can function in a climate of

increasing individualism and commodification.

**AB:** You've also played with this idea of individualism in projects such as *Married by Powers* (2002), using the idea of a collection as a discursive framework.

**BVdP:** *Married by Powers* was very much about the conditions of cultural production. We wanted to explore the ways in which a collection can be activated and revitalised, used as a tool or even a weapon to view, comment on and rethink culture, questioning the role of the individual in these processes. We invited nine artists, dancers, filmmakers etc. to choose individual pieces from a selection of works we had made from the collection of FRAC Nord-Pas de Calais, Dunkerque. It was important that they could motivate and explain their selection and put forward ideas of what they thought a collection could be and how it should function. A collection can only live if people are able to think about it or are stimulated to think about it. We created a situation that encouraged the participants to not only look at the individual pieces but also to think about collections in general and to use them as a framework for discussion, which is what museums are about.

**AB:** Collections, their histories and possible alternative narratives were also the focus of your recent exhibition *Fly me to the Moon*. Can you tell me a bit about this project?

**BVdP:** *Fly Me To The Moon* was commissioned by the Rijksmuseum, currently in a period of re-building, when recently they invited 'living' artists to work with the museum and create work within the collection. From the beginning we decided we wanted to work with something from the collection that wasn't an obvious choice. We were lucky to be able to explore the museum's storerooms, and we were looking for something that would generate a story. After four of these visits one of the curators opened a drawer containing a piece of moon rock which was collected on the Apollo 11 mission and given as a present to a former prime minister who bequeathed it to the museum on his death. To us, it seemed such a strange object to have ended up in a collection of Dutch history and so with this focus we sought to construct an exhibition containing several layers of mediation – a book, a poster project across Amsterdam's public spaces, and a guided tour with a 'dynamic script' that, throughout the course of the exhibition, was elaborated with anecdotes and other snippets of information the tour guide felt she wanted to add.

**AB:** So as in *Married by Powers*, your intervention questioned and somewhat shifted the idea of an official history through personalisation. How did the museum respond to this project?

**BVdP:** In the end there were certainly more questions than answers (or straight facts); who says this stone in a vitrine is really a stone from the moon? You begin to question all these things as well as the official story of the collection and who writes this narrative and





Bik van der Pol, *Married by Powers*, 2002 . TENT, Rotterdam

Photo: J. van der Pol

who own these pieces in the aftermath of colonialism and wars. Unsurprisingly, the museum didn't want us to question ideas of colonialism.

**AB:** The re-telling or uncovering of forgotten histories is also the starting point of your ongoing *Past Imperfect* project in which Bik Van der Pol becomes a research facility working towards creating a growing archive. How did this project begin?

**BVdP:** We've always been interested in histories and political events that seem to have undergone a disappearing act, or how facts we take for granted are often based upon a mis-reading of actual events. *Past Imperfect* began in 2001 when we were invited by Waling Boers to do a project focussing on the work of artist Lee Lozano at BuroFriedrich, Berlin. We didn't know the work at all, but after a week or so of searching we found that there was almost no information about her. This seemed strange as her practice had been so radical and taken conceptual art to such amazing extremes, but she disappeared from official art history until the early 2000s. Now of course she is far from forgotten by the artworld and her work has been shown widely over the past few years. The show we worked on consisted of eleven of her instruction pieces and some pieces of ours that we felt were related, as they were about disappearing and what happens to this information. We also organised four events in which we invited artists, theoreticians and people who knew her (like Thierry de Duve) to talk about their work and to discuss ideas around history and nostalgia. We recorded all these talks with the intention of making

a publication but once we transcribed everything we felt that the publication would have been too shallow or maybe too much of an homage to someone with such a radical attitude; she clearly wanted to disappear and it didn't feel right to create a memorial.

**AB:** How do you decide what historical moments are going to be brought back into contemporary historical consciousness through this project?

**BVdP:** It really depends. Humour is definitely important, or maybe it is that we see the humour of things. It's also important that they are part of a shared history. Lozano's case is a perfect example, there's a sense of craziness, humour and a rich personal story. There's also an idea of radicality, which runs throughout the project. This was particularly poignant in 2001 when the world suddenly became a more radical place with governments on the front line. How radical can we hope to be when people in power are covering things up, making them invisible? The project in many ways is working towards an awareness that information is and always will be manipulated – by ourselves and the stories that we tell. The project doesn't go against the processes of history as such, but examines how and why things get left out of the official story and how these moments might be used to think about our present situation. After all, the public sphere is not only formed by the moments that remain in our consciousness but also by those that have been left out, whether on purpose or simply by coincidence.





Top: Bik van der Pol, *Lobby / Office Piece for Budapest*, 2002. Installed in the office of the Studio of Young Artists Association in Budapest in November 2002  
middle: Bik van der Pol, *The Bookshop Piece*, 1996 Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam With Peter Fillingham. Photo: Bob Goedewagen  
bottom: Bik van der Pol, *Absolut Stockholm Label or life city on a platform* 2000-2001 Moderna Museet Projekt, Stockholm. Photo J van der Pol