

Dear Uri,

It's been some time since we last spoke and much has happened in Eindhoven in the meantime. As you know, we were excited about the invitation from the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven to take part in the Be(com)ing Dutch exhibition, not only given the approach and contents of this large-scale project but also because this invitation provided us with the opportunity to fulfil a long-harboured dream and the ability to focus our attention on the Evoluon. The Evoluon also impressed you when we showed you the pictures and you immediately understood our fascination with this building. The Evoluon's unique architecture not only makes it one of Eindhoven's landmark buildings, it is also closely linked to the history of Philips.

The former mayor of Eindhoven once said, '*The Evoluon is crucial for the image of Eindhoven*'. It is part of the collective consciousness of the people who live in Eindhoven and the many generations of Dutch and foreign visitors who have come to the city. We were wondering if the building could once again play such a crucial role? However, let's go back to the beginning.

The internationally renowned electronics company Philips, one of the companies of which the Netherlands is so proud, built the Evoluon in Eindhoven, the site of their former headquarters, to celebrate their 75th anniversary. The building was opened in 1966 as a museum of technology and progress.

It was a museum that had everything our current politicians long for; it was interactive, attracted a wide range of visitors from all walks of society, it was educational yet fun, and there were plenty of things to do, touch and try out, which brought visitors literally into contact with developments in the field of technology.

It was an exciting museum, with, for example, a large moving robot that behaved like a household pet, a bicycle that generated enough energy to operate a camera when in motion and a mirror that, as we remember, did not reflect your mirror image but rather the image of how others saw you. I remember that coming as quite a shock because you didn't recognise yourself. This was the inspiration for our first clue regarding the themes of Be(com)ing Dutch. Who actually are you if you cannot immediately recognise your own image just because it is presented to you in a way other than you are accustomed to?

It is a shame that this interactive museum no longer exists. It closed its doors to the public in 1989, partly because new technology was being overtaken by ever more rapid developments and partly because, in the 1980s, Philips was forced to economise. As a museum, the Evoluon would have to be profitable and that was deemed to be unrealistic.

Upon closure, the collection was divided among different museums in the Netherlands. Philips still owns the building but it is now used as a commercially run conference centre that has to turn a profit.

The Evoluon museum was a victim of economic pragmatism, but luckily the building remains.

We don't think that you will object if we continue to eulogise the building, as you too were enthusiastic about the shape, the enormous flying saucer. And you were not the only one. Do you remember that we told you about the Spanish association that is still active here? In the 1960s, Philips invited Spanish immigrants to come to Eindhoven to live and work. They were the first foreign labourers, the first newcomers, and they proudly sent photos of the Evoluon home to show what a modern city they were living in. For them, it was also an icon.

Incidentally, we discovered in interviews with the architect and in accompanying documentation that this saucer is not a fixed part of the building. It simply rests on the support due to its sheer weight! Architect Louis Kalf, who was head of the Philips design department for many years, designed the building. He was one of the pioneers in the field of industrial design, and was also the man who gave Philips' design a clear and modern face. He was the man behind the famous Philips logo and, with his team, designed many Philips appliances, such as electric shavers, ladyshaves, televisions, lamps, telephones, vacuum cleaners, speakers, coffee machines, food-mixers, record players, CD players, DVD players, etc.

In 1961, he was commissioned to design the Evoluon. The idea for the building came from Frits Philips, who is thought to have been involved in the design process as well. The story goes that the Evoluon was based on a sketch that he made on a paper napkin. Frits Philips was an idealist who wanted to impart a beautiful and especially educational gift to the population. Philips had already had temporary pavilions designed for different world fairs such as that designed by Le Corbusier for the Brussels World Fair. You are aware, of course, that the recently renovated Atomium is a remnant of

this Expo? At a certain moment, Philips stopped investing in the world fairs in order to establish a more permanent exhibition in one of its own buildings here in Eindhoven. Originally, the idea was to display Philips products only but this was later expanded into a more general collection.

It was intended to be a crowd-puller for the city, it had to arouse curiosity and conjure associations with space travel and modern technology.

It is logical, therefore, that we immediately think about well known films such as Kubrick's '2001: A Space Odyssey' and Spielberg's 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind'.

The dome is gigantic. Perhaps the photo we sent you gives you some idea but it is better to give you a few details as well: the dome is 77 metres in diameter and rests on twelve V-shaped columns. A building in the shape of a saucer had never been attempted before, so there were a great many calculations and experiments required before a reliable construction could be devised.

The dome's structure also greatly resembles the spherical shapes constructed by the American inventor, architect and poet Buckminster Fuller, who, having heard about the building, travelled to the Netherlands shortly after it opened to see it for himself. Even today, the Evoluon evokes utopian images. You too were surprised that the futuristic architecture of the Evoluon in 1966 was still so futuristic today. You might say that the Evoluon captures the imagination.

Anyway, enough about the building. Let's move on to the imagination. After the collapse of every global utopia, questions surrounding identity and social commitment became an ever-growing issue in political and cultural debates, not only in the Netherlands, but also worldwide. With Be(com)ing Dutch, the Van Abbemuseum asks itself whether art can provide alternative examples and models that will help us reflect on how we can coexist in today's world.

These are significant questions, and make considerable demands on fields such as the arts and the artists who populate it.

However, we feel that the power of the imagination can have a significant effect. You know all about that. However, perhaps it is necessary to approach these questions from a somewhat less pretentious perspective, a perspective that is less abstract, less substantial, less distant. More humane perhaps, so that these questions are magnified and can become more personal. Put simply, we feel that before we are in a position to cultivate constructive answers, we must first create shared experiences, experiences that can be shared by many people, even if only for a brief moment.

You know that during our investigations, we also discovered Carl Jung's book *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*. Somewhere in the text, Jung says (and I quote): *'In the threatening situation of the current era, when people are beginning to feel that everything is at stake, the projection-creating fantasy soars beyond the realm of earthly organisations and powers into the heavens, into interstellar space, where the rulers of human fate, the gods, once had their abode in the planets... Even people who would never have thought that a religious problem could be such a serious matter that concerned them personally are beginning to ask themselves fundamental questions. Under these circumstances, it would not be at all surprising if those sections of the community who ask themselves nothing were visited by 'visions', by a widespread myth seriously believed in by some and rejected as absurd by others.'* (end quote)

Could this also be applicable today? The more afraid and uncertain society becomes, the more threatening the world and the bigger the imagination. Perhaps so, if we follow the daily news coverage in the press and other media, and if we see what images are being created by and with the help of the succession of minor and major scandals.

I read in the newspaper recently that even the Vatican has recognised the existence of UFOs. Is the Pope also sensitive to phenomena other than what he normally stands for? Is that an indication of uncertain times?

How powerful is the imagination?

What is possible if a number of people join forces at the right time in the right place?

We know full well, of course, that the Evoluon will not provide us with the answer we need. It may, however, do something completely different.

By reopening the Evoluon to the general public and by summoning everyone, it should be possible, in theory, to take advantage of this opportunity to create a shared experience so that during a moment of intense concentration, a situation can be created that strengthens the power of the imagination, a moment that could propagate a modern myth, a new narrative for Eindhoven.

Call it collective mental strength. Knowing the building rests only on its support structure, we are perhaps asking ourselves the impossible yet plausible question of whether collectivity is capable of making this building fly. Or at least to hover slightly...

In recent months, visitors to 'Be(com)ing Dutch' have been asked to come to the Evoluon on the final day of the exhibition to generate their mental strength and allow this icon of technological innovation to fly – an innocent proposal labelled by one critic as 'informal spiritualism', a description we consider to be a great compliment. We are keen to remain informal and unconnected, and with 'spiritualism', she hit the nail on the head: according to our trusted internet source Wikipedia, spirituality 'in recent years often carries connotations of a believer having a faith more personal, less dogmatic, more open to new ideas and myriad influences, and more pluralistic than the doctrinal/dogmatic faiths of mature religions'.

Spirituality, therefore, has more to do with possibilities than impossibilities. She probably meant the sort of spirituality with which you have become famous and which others see as nonsense. But, nonsense or otherwise, our proposal is not really something to be afraid of, is it? On the contrary, we want to create a situation in which everyone involved will ask themselves, at a later date perhaps, or on the way home, what actually just happened. Somewhere in that question lies the strength of the shared experience, because that is where collective narratives begin, and narratives are the basis of the imagination. When we told our plans to a friend in Vilnius, she asked without a trace of irony: '*are you insured?...because you never know what will happen...*'

As you know, we would have been delighted if you could have attended. Not as an attraction or a means of drawing a crowd but as a moderator, so that, with your help and experience, we would have been able to levitate the dome of the Evoluon.

However, the organisation of the Evoluon has refused to grant us access to the building for this performance. They said that we were 'not their target audience' and have stuck to their decision. This is why we have decided not to ask you to come all this way. Because cancelling is never an option, it seemed a good idea to share our thoughts with those people who might come to the final day of the exhibition. Our thoughts on what we find special about the building, and what this all has to do with identity, public space, and to think aloud, and perhaps somewhat incoherently, about the privatisation of public space and how it impacts our experience of 'having access to something'. Or what it means for our experience of 'having no access'. What does it mean that we cannot do what we came here to do today? That we stand here empty-handed?

Around 1980, the art magazine 'Artforum' circulated a questionnaire among artists asking them for their opinion and experiences with regard to changes in their audiences. The public was an issue even then. Institutions asked themselves who their audiences were, where they went when not visiting the museum, why they did not visit them, and what that meant for the *raison d'être* of those institutions and artists.

The artist Vito Acconci said that if the gallery and the art space could still be seen as spaces of activity, there were two options: 1) to use the gallery as a 'language', as an imparter of meaning, or 2) to use the gallery as a space in which art 'occurs', where art has a place while someone looks on, the viewer. He chose, as we still do, for the second option, although we would like to note that art also occurs in areas other than galleries and art spaces. The gallery, therefore, mutates. In Acconci's words, it becomes '*a community meeting-place, a place where a community could be formed, where a community could be called to order, called to a particular purpose.*' Roughly translated: art occurs, or better still: can occur where a community can be formed by convening it for a specific purpose. In a certain sense, this is very close to what you do.

What does it mean if, as artists, we abandon the museum or the gallery, and unleash our observations, our 'anthropology', into our everyday surroundings, into communal spaces shared by different communities, the space that we call public?

It is not a coincidence that we use the term 'anthropology'. Despite anthropology and art being different entities, we believe that they also have similarities. In modern anthropology, culture is understood to be central to human nature. In other words: our species has developed the capacity to view our world in symbols. We can learn and teach these symbols socially and we can transform the world (and ourselves) on the basis of such symbols.

This is why we are so fascinated by the Evoluon: it provides us with the means of imagining that what we see can be seen differently.

And when we say ‘differently’, we don’t mean in the same sense as Duchamp’s declaration that the Woolworth building, for a long time the highest in New York, was readymade. Transformation, which for Duchamp signified a transformation from building to objet d’art, can occur other than via the readymade. You could also see it as meaning that the strength of an object, in this case a building, is already implicitly present in the object itself. You can, for example, admire the architecture of the Evoluon, or be astonished by the construction. However, the implicit strength of the building is far more important: it summons us to let the dome fly, like a large flying saucer. It also summons us to let our imagination run wild, which is what this building embodies. You only have to let it loose. And this is the purpose of this event, or rather, was the purpose of this event.

The Evoluon is not a public building. It was once a museum that, at set times, welcomed the public with open arms. And it was, and still is, owned by Philips, a private company. The fact that the Evoluon, as previously mentioned, was the idealistic vision of one man is essential. When it still functioned as museum, it met the description of hospitality found on the Be(com)ing Dutch website, in which hospitality is defined by Jacques Derrida: ‘Just say yes to what presents itself’. The text goes on to describe hospitality as the characteristic or disposition to receive and treat guests and strangers in a warm, friendly and generous manner. If I remember correctly, Derrida also considered hospitality to be ‘unconditional’. That is, you should not expect anything in return, because that turns hospitality into a ‘deal’: payment will follow later.

Within Philips, the Evoluon has been given another use and is, in that sense, no longer hospitable in the way Derrida described. The idealism of the period in which the building was constructed has been usurped by a commercialism in which hospitality has taken on a whole new meaning. Access is no longer unrestricted as it was in the time of the museum, but reserved for target groups that organise conferences or other get-togethers.

But for the imagination to roam free, Derrida’s sense of hospitality is vital: just say yes to what presents itself. After all, without the imagination, this building would probably never have been built at all.

The question now is how we want to deal with private buildings that make up part of our surroundings, of our collective consciousness, and that contribute to Eindhoven’s image. Should these buildings remain private property or is it the role of government, local or national, as defender of the public interest, to make these important places part of the public domain? Can a company – can commerce – be solely responsible? Is it conceivable that the Evoluon can (again) become a space that is accessible to everyone, and not restricted to a select few? We wonder. After all, the image of the Evoluon is definitely a public one. It is ours, our property, in our memory. Why can we, as the general public, not share in the experience of this building and access both its interior and exterior? What does public space actually mean? Is it the exclusive domain of public building, streets, parks, etc.? It would seem so given where we are now. We can stand here because it is a public space. We can look at the Evoluon, but we cannot enter it. Not yet.

There is no acknowledgement of the fact that the image that the public has of the Evoluon, the space that the Evoluon occupies in the collective consciousness, is not the property of the Evoluon, but is ours, the public’s. It has been withdrawn from our public space, and with it our means of imagining that what we see can be seen differently.

Uri, this is become a long exposé, longer than we expected. There has been a lot of communication between us! We wanted to thank you for your interest, your open and enthusiastic response to our proposal, and of course for your unconditional willingness to join us on this adventure. We hope that another opportunity will arise that will allow us to work together.

Kind regards, Liesbeth and Jos