

**THE H+F COLLECTION  
TEN YEARS ON  
THE MAKING OF**

**HAN NEFKENS**



## October 1998 – Looking

I'm standing in front of a photograph of a city on a bay with a setting sun, a photograph that's quite different from many other photographs, although the subject appears to be the same. What makes it different is hard to put my finger on. Maybe it's the size. This photo is at least two by three metres. Or the resolution. This is so clear and detailed that you can see the curtains hanging in the apartment windows. Is it the peacefulness, perhaps? The reference to what is *not* there – in this case the people who populate this city? Or is it me? Has my gaze suddenly changed?

Never before have I looked at contemporary art this way. Never before have I taken it seriously. Earlier – thirty years ago – my best friend Frank and I would nudge each other whenever we saw someone swoon over a pile of old car tires or a pot full of grease and a rough blanket. 'The emperor's new clothes,' we called it. People who were pretending to see something in the hope of being part of it. But all the right-minded people knew better. There was here nothing to see. Nothing at all.

We would go to the Stedelijk Museum and laugh at all the intellectual affectation. Then we'd eat apple pie in the museum cafeteria because it was the best apple pie in Amsterdam.

But now I'm in New York – with Frank, who is working here as cultural ambassador – and I'm in a gallery in SoHo looking at a photograph of a middle-aged woman. This isn't just any middle-aged woman. It's the artist herself. The photo is showing us something, but what it's showing isn't only what we see. It's as if the artist were saying that appearances can be deceptive.

I take this new way of seeing with me when we go out to eat that night at a Japanese restaurant. With great care I study the deep pink of the

salmon on the piece of sushi I'm holding between two chopsticks. I look at the purple of the octopus. Even the water in my glass looks different.

'So there really is something to see in contemporary art, if you just look.'

Frank nods.

'I want to see more. I want to understand it.'

'Then why don't you start collecting art?'

I fall silent. Why not? Whatever I don't spend of the money I get every year from the family assets stays in the bank or goes into long-term bonds. That's what I've been taught to do. It's the way I was raised.

Photographs instead of deposits? Paintings instead of bonds? I can just hear my father's voice. 'That is not what I had in mind.' But then I see the photo of the city on the bay.

What if I want it now? If I really want it?

'Come on, Frank, let's go buy that picture.'

'I don't think that's such a good idea,' says Frank, who is no stranger to my impatience. 'First you have to learn to tell the difference between what's good and what isn't. You have to discover what you like. You have to talk to gallery owners, to people from museums, to artists. And you have to look, look, look. Just start there.'

I put my chopsticks down, next to the sushi. I haven't eaten a bite. But I've discovered a new world. And I'm going to carve out a place for myself in it.

## May 1999 – Remake

It's a warm spring day in Paris, and there's nothing more pleasant than sauntering through the city on a day like this. I start out with a walk along the Seine. Turning right, I come to the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Hanging in front of the museum are banners announcing an exhibition. The name of the artist – Pipilotti Rist – means nothing to me, but there's something provocative about the exhibition title – *Remake of the Weekend*.

Ever since my experience in New York I've started visiting museums and galleries. I've spent the past few months talking with gallery owners and artists. I've purchased art books and started subscribing to *Artforum*, *Flash Art* and *Parkett*. I've attended art fairs in Germany, Switzerland and France. But the main thing I've done is look – over and over again. And I keep seeing new aspects of a work; I keep discovering more and more.

I still feel something of a stranger in this world. I don't know the people and they don't know me. Recently when I asked an Amsterdam gallery owner what the price was of a painting I was admiring, he looked up from his newspaper with an expression of utter boredom and said, 'Expensive,' and kept on reading.

What has now become clear to me is that art is an image of the world, made *for* the world. The artist holds up a mirror to us, no matter how distortive that mirror might be. Buying works for myself alone is contrary to what art is all about. But how would I translate that in practical terms? What role would I play? How would I take what I find special and share it with other people?

I still don't have the answers to any of these questions as I enter the museum on this lovely spring day. *Remake of the Weekend*, as it turns

out, is not being shown in a standard museum gallery but in a recreated domestic interior. On the chairs, the bed, the table and the lamps, life-sized video images are being projected. A naked woman creeps in the rain across the kitchen cabinets, pink-red clouds float across a lampshade.

I feel myself being swallowed up by the world of Pipilotti Rist. A naked woman rolls in the moss. I smell the wet earth and the fragrance of the sun on her naked arms. I smell the flowers and I taste the ripe fruit, whose juice squirts out as she steps on it. I feel the rainwater on my skin and let myself be guided by the languid music that fills the air.

Two hours later I'm standing outside, and I know. I want other people to be just as moved by the art I select as I was by the images of Pipilotti Rist. The feeling that this art evokes in me is something I want to share with others, even when I'm not there. I want to collect, in collaboration with museums. But how do I go about it?

## June 2001 – Cinquante/Fifty

Art Basel. I'm here with Sjarel Ex, director of the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, where I'd very much like to exhibit works that I enjoy. He's clearly interested in the idea. To see whether we have similar taste, we've agreed to wonder around the fair separately for two hours and then show each other what has caught our attention.

In Art Unlimited's enormous space I hear vaguely familiar music: the melodious and dreamy sound of a woman singing. I'm standing in front of two large video screens. On one screen a naked man is running down an empty highway, on the other a woman is pressing her face so hard against an apartment window that all her features are distorted. Her red lipstick leaves streaks on the glass. They're my two frequently repeating dreams: running but getting nowhere, and being shut up behind glass while life outside is calling me.

'Cinquante/Fifty' is the name of this work by Pipilotti Rist. I stand in front of the screens for a long time, hoping that the man will eventually get where he wants to go, and that one of the windows will swing open so the woman can let her hair tumble down like a Rapunzel. But the video, like my dreams, is on a loop, endlessly repeating the same images.

Later in the afternoon Sjarel shows me what he has seen. Again I hear that now-familiar music. The man is still running down the highway and the woman is still trapped behind the window. 'Cinquante/Fifty' is the work that Sjarel would like to exhibit in his museum.

Ten minutes later I've purchased my first work of art.

A few months later in the Centraal Museum I see the naked man running down the highway again. He's small now. He's being shown

on a screen the size of a television, as is the woman pushing her face against the glass. Yet I recognize them immediately. This is the first time that a work with which I am associated has been shown in public. It's also the first time I've seen it since my purchase.

The feeling that comes over me is not one of possession, or the thought that this is mine. On the contrary, here in the museum, among the other works by Pipilotti, I realize that you can never own a work of art, even if you've bought it yourself. It belongs to the world, just as the tree in your garden is part of a larger whole. I am the guardian. The pride I feel comes from the idea that I have selected this work. I find satisfaction in watching people bend towards the screen and wonder out loud where the man is running and whether the woman behind the glass is looking for him.

I hum softly along with the soundtrack and stand near the work to observe the visitors' reactions. A woman with long earrings squints to get a better view. A thin young man moves his hand to the rhythm of the music. A girl nudges her girlfriend: 'take a look at this'. I am a fly on the wall. A fly on Pipilotti's wall.

## March 2002 – Beautiful

I've come home with an empty head to an empty house. My head is empty because I've just spent three months in an Amsterdam hospital dealing with encephalitis, and thinking is still very difficult for me. The house in Barcelona is empty because I was sick during the move; all our things are packed in boxes and crates.

The boxes and crates can stay that way as far as I'm concerned. Tea towels, dishes, books and clothes – none of it interests me. All I want to see are the works of art that are packed in cardboard and leaning against the wall.

It's not only because I miss them. It's mainly because I want to see if they still strike me as beautiful. What if, besides all the other abilities – the ability to reason, to read and to write, the ability to keep my balance and to remember the name of the street we live on – what if my feeling for art has also been affected? And the works I chose with so much passion before I was sick – what if they look ugly now?

The first to be stripped of its protective cover is the painting by Thomas Ruff. Tears spring to my eyes (people who can't think very well tend to cry a lot). The work is lovely, much more beautiful than I remembered. The red, yellow and green all run together like ink on blotting paper, the shapes dance like curling smoke.

Then comes the painting by Bernard Frize, the short pastel stripes that together seem to form a bookshelf. The painting could have been a photograph, and the photograph by Thomas Ruff could have been a painting.

For me something is beautiful if it doesn't matter what it is as long as it demonstrates what it's all about. I love art that creates an image but at the same time leaves room in my head. I love art that evokes questions, because when there are questions I'm not alone.

When there are questions I've got something to do. When there

are questions my empty head is suddenly full.

## May 2002 – Tiny bit

Some people live on after their death in the heads of others. They live as a colour, a shape, a gesture. One element of themselves is left over, and sometimes it's not the element that they themselves would have chosen. You can't choose how you're going to live on in the heads of others.

Part of my memory has sunk into a deep sleep, and that's why some people who are still very much alive and kicking are only a single element living in my head.

It's just the way I remember art. Two weeks ago I was walking through an art fair in Amsterdam. I was bombarded by thousands of images, but I only remember a few: the head of a 'Mechelse' chicken and people in a truck.

How does my head work? Why do I see two things out of thousands? Why these two and not the nine hundred and ninety-eight others? How do I make the selection? Why do I make the selection this way and other people don't?

Why one thing and not the other? That's the question.

The people in my life, the dead and the living, are a work of art. They live on as a colour, a shape, a gesture. They have put on their most beautiful clothes, but all I see is a button, the edge of a sock, the woman in trousers. It's just like when I look at a painting or a photograph: for me the detail has become the whole. My head breaks wholes into tiny bits so I can take them with me.

I only have a tiny bit of the world, and for me that bit is everything.

## June 2002 – Dinner

It's a strange sensation to no longer remember anything – to be as I am now, recovering from encephalitis. To have a memory that's as flat as a Carl André tile sculpture. It's like the snowy landscape that you see when you don't recognize a single one of the questions on the exam you've been studying for for months. You know the answer is hidden under the snow, but you don't have a shovel. You can't dig. You can't get to it.

During a dinner in Basel, a German gentleman with severe eyeglass frames asks me what kinds of things I collect. I can't remember a single name, so I look over at my oldest friend, Frank. Frank knows everything, after all. That's why I brought him along. But Frank is deep in conversation with a French painter.

I try hard to think and I point to the French painter, but even I know that doesn't count. I'm silent for a moment. Then I tell the German gentleman that I'm recovering from an illness and that it's still somewhat difficult for me to remember things. I manage to divert his attention, despite but mainly thanks to the encephalitis.

And then they come back, drop by drop. The artists. 'I'm back,' says Jeff Wall. 'So are we!' shout Bill Viola and Tony Oursler in unison. Pipilotti Rist sticks out her tongue. She always was a bit more playful.

Then, suddenly, they're all there, for the first time in six months. Angela Bulloch, Ryan Gander, Erwin Wurm.

'*Ach so,*' interrupts the German gentleman, but there's no stopping me.

Karin Sander, Dan Graham, Thomas Rentmeister. '*Ich bin besser,*' I shout, '*ich bin viel besser!*'

The German gentleman frowns and turns abruptly to the woman sitting next to him. 'And what kinds of things do you collect?'

But I keep on going. Desiree Dolron, Runa Islam, Uta Barth, Daan van Golden. They're back. Finally, they're home.

## September 2002 – Without glasses

Now look, people ask. If you've really forgotten everything, and if you don't remember anything from the past, how come you can recognize all those works of art – from a distance, with your glasses off? How do you account for that, people ask.

I don't know. I mean, I don't know anything. I can only guess. I know there are some people suffering from aphasia who can't utter a single syllable, but they remember all the words and melodies from every song they've ever heard. These people can't talk or write, but they can sing like the best of them. That part of their brains has not been affected.

Maybe the same thing happened to me with my encephalitis. Maybe all the parts of my brains are affected except the contemporary art part. But it's not the same as it was. I still think the same things are beautiful, but now I think they're even more beautiful than before. I still like the same artists, but now I think they're even better. The fact that I once bought something by Roni Horn and Bill Viola I regard as a stroke of genius on my part.

This is the only thing I can still appreciate, more or less, about who I once was. I haven't the slightest idea what it was like – or what I was like. I can read the sketches I once wrote, but reading is hard. There's a lot I don't understand. Right now my own writing is too complicated for me. But works of art are different. I look at them and think: that's magnificent. It touches my soul the way our dog Ollie does when he looks at me.

There are other bits of my brain that are still intact: I still love the same people. Except now I love them much more. I've lost a lot, but what's left over has increased in intensity. I never thought I could love people



so much – that I get tears in my eyes when I’m standing on the balcony and see Felipe walking towards me from a distance.

What’s left over is exactly like modern art: a great deal has been omitted, but what’s there is intensely present. Maybe that’s why I can recognize works of art, from a distance, with my glasses off.

## **January 2003 – Why it sticks with me**

Of all the works you’ve ever seen at exhibitions, of all the works you’ve seen in your life, only a handful stick with you. Of all the works that are hanging on my walls at home, there are just a few that I’m able to see better by the day. The others become part of the interior, they become one with the couch, with the bed, with the chair.

Why does that handful of works stick with you? Why are those the works that you see better by the day? Why those works and not the hundreds – the thousands – of others? Why can you remember that one work, that one experience, from the whole ocean of possibilities? It’s a riddle, a mystery. But ever since my memory started living a life of its own, separated from the rest of my life, I think about this more and more. Since my brain started living a life of its own, it’s become more difficult to reflect on things. Knowing is beyond me.

But actually I do know. Deep down I know for certain.

Of all those works of art, of all those experiences, only a couple are really special. It’s the good works of art that stick with you. It’s the natural selection of the brain, of life. My brain, my life, works like a sieve. Most of the stuff slips away, most of it disappears into the abundance, into the sea of all that is. What’s really good – what’s really important – is what remains. That’s what sticks.

I see thousands of images every day, millions in a lifetime. Only a few stick with me. They keep coming back, and I never lose them – even without a crib sheet or audiovisual aids. Works by Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Floris Claesz. van Dijck and Mondriaan – they stick. I know them like the back of my hand. There are other works I’d recognize, but I don’t carry them around with me all the time. They haven’t become part of me, that part that you see with greater and greater clarity.

Good art. There must be a better way to describe it, but for the

moment I'm at a loss. I know what it is, though. I can feel it. Jeff Wall, Shirin Neshat, Roni Horn. Out of that ocean of artists, out of all those creative individuals, why do I choose them? Why is it their work that I keep seeing in my mind's eye and that I know by heart, even when they're not here? There's got to be a good reason for it. Out of all that there is, the whole abundance of images, this handful of works is what sticks with me – because my brain, my life, can't contain any more. It's this: because it's just plain good.

I'm going to go back and walk along the walls of my house, and look at those few works again that I see better by the day. I'm taking all the rest down. But these will stay. For good. I don't know why. I know it only too well.

## February 2003 – Seeing

My recovery from encephalitis is going much more slowly than I would like. But I've re-entered the world with an enthusiasm bordering on pigheadedness, and I see it as I want to see it. I'm trying to lord it over reality. It's a struggle, and every now and then I take a nose dive. It shocks me to discover that things are just as they are. Dreams are supposed to be a source of inspiration, not a criterion for testing the world. But that's a lesson I refuse to learn.

Sometimes I catch a brief glimpse of reality. Through the haze of my longings and the mist of my fears, I see the world in all its power, heartbreakingly beautiful, outrageously cruel. It gives me goose bumps, and reflexively I cover my eyes with my hand. Reality is too blinding. I can't look it in the face.

Someone should tie my arms behind my back, but even then I'd squeeze my eyes shut. It's my nature. I need my paintings to tell me what reality is – my photographs, sculptures and installations by Roni Horn, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Jeff Wall, Bernard Frize, David Goldblatt, Annika von Hausswolff, Sam Taylor-Wood.

Show what you see: that's art. But see what's being shown: now *that* is the skill I need to learn.

## April 2003 – So high in the sky

Is it a wall tapestry I'm looking at here at Art Brussels? An abstract painting? Or an abstract photograph? I see a spot of aquamarine in the lower right, and above that a white strip with black transverse lines, followed by a light grey strip and ten strips that vary from light green, almost beige, to the darkest green.

On closer inspection I see that it's a work by Gerco de Ruijter. He tied a camera to a kite and took pictures of landscapes. The aquamarine is the sea and the white strip with black lines is a dune area with a road behind it. The green is grassland.

I understand why De Ruijter works this way. When you're high in the sky you can see the world better. But more than that: high in the sky you're free, even though it's by means of a line connected to a kite.

In primary school I never paid attention – not to what was being said in class, that is. I looked at the teacher and saw the chalk lines on her hands, the flower pattern on her dress, the lock of hair that fell across her forehead. I wondered what her living room looked like and what she had eaten for breakfast that morning.

I could stare out of the window for hours. When a plane passed overhead, I fantasized that I was in that plane and that I could see the boy behind the window in a low, grey school building looking up. So I was in two places at once.

That's how Gerco de Ruijter and I met each other, way up there in the sky *and* here on earth. We're both in two places at once.

## April 2003 – Paintings

'Paintings' is what Paul Graham calls the series of photographs on display in the Anthony Reynolds stand here at Art Brussels. And I know exactly why. With the lighting, the abstraction, the colour and the form, the fourteen photographs of graffiti on the walls of public toilets look just like paintings. Some of them remind me of the work of the American artist Cy Twombly. The way they're framed pulls them out of their context and makes them special. More than special, in fact: I think it's a work of genius to make exalted art out of something that is lewd and at first glance uninteresting.

I let the photographs have an effect on me. The gallery owner comes up and begins to sing the work's praises. This is unnecessary and makes me think of a fish monger at the market crying that his cod is the freshest.

I ask him how much the works cost. They cost 15,000 pounds each, 15,000 precious pounds. I realize that I have to have the whole series, so the works can be shown in their entirety. But 210,000 pounds is a small fortune. I could buy a Bill Viola for that. Or two films by Shirin Neshat, or a work by Tony Oursler.

I ask the gallery owner to show me reproductions of other work by Graham. He slips me a couple of books. The photographs are nice, some are even good, but they aren't at the level of 'Paintings'. This causes me to have second thoughts. If I buy one work, I'm attaching myself to the artist's entire oeuvre. What I buy must be representative of all the rest. I'm not interested in one good work by an artist who otherwise is only mediocre.

But what if Graham's next works are at this level, or even better? What if this series is part of what will eventually be an ascending line? On the other hand, what if it's not? Then I have an artist in my

collection whose work is of lower quality than that of the others.

I decide not to do it.

I continue walking through the fair, look at other work. But the images by Paul Graham are fixed in my mind. Before I know it I'm back at the Anthony Reynolds stand.

Are the photographs still as good as they were half an hour ago? Even better, it seems. So should I buy them anyway? The photographs that look like paintings would fit in well in my collection of paintings that look like photographs, and vice versa. But they're too expensive, and I'm still not sure about the artist.

Just before I leave, the gallery holder presses a booklet with reproductions of the fourteen photographs in my hand. They make me think of the postcards of favourite works of art that I bought from museums as a boy and tacked to the wall of my bedroom.

I put the booklet on my night table and go through it before going to sleep. Later I give the booklet a place on my bookshelf, between Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Katharina Grosse. No matter how thin it is, the pink linen cover stands out amid the mostly grey and black books around it.

## May 2003 – Hatakeyama

From a distance it looks like red, white and blue stripes of light, cones of fire against a dark sky. Coming closer I see that the photographs by Naoya Hatakeyama were taken through rain-streaked car windows. Distorted reflections of the night landscapes can be seen in every raindrop.

There's no doubt in my mind. I don't have to think twice. I know right away: I'm buying these photographs.

Why these works by Hatakeyama and not the photos of horses by Charlotte Dumas, which are also being shown here at Huis Marseille? Hatakeyama's aesthetic appeals to me: the colours and compositions, the mysteriousness of the diffuse images. It's the poetic quality of his work, the hiddenness, that challenges my fantasy. The artist says something but leaves enough room in my head to think about other things. I'm enchanted by the way Hatakeyama paints with his camera.

But I come up with these reasons *after* having made the decision, not before. Something in me makes the decision before I know it and then shares it with me.

What is that 'something' that makes decisions for me? Who is that other, deeply hidden I? Is it my genes? Is it the accumulation of everything I've seen, heard and experienced so far? Is it the moment that I pull myself up in the playpen and look at the sunlight shining through the Venetian blinds and onto the wall? Is it the afternoon I wait with pain in my stomach for my father to come home, and have to show him my poor report card? Is it my tired mother lying on the couch? My first cigarette in the bushes of Beatrix Park? My first necking session in

the same bushes? Is it the evening I look out from my attic room and fantasize about a land far away where one day I will live? Is it the first time I see the palm trees in the south of France, the first American licence plate, the first taco in Mexico, the view from my balcony in Barcelona?

Is it the doctor's room where I wait for the results that will change my life? Is it the brother who looks at me beseechingly before closing his eyes for good? Is it the hand of Felipe holding mine as I sit in silence? Is it the hours behind the computer, searching for words, searching for myself?

Is it the constant fear of failing to live up to expectations? The pressure I feel because time is running out? The gentle piano music coming from outside? The warbling of the bird at the neighbours'?

Is that why I choose one, and not the other?

It's as if there's a magnet hidden in Hatakeyama's work, a magnet that attracts the magnet in me hidden deep in my stomach. It's a natural force, and I'm helpless against it.

## June 2003 – Art Basel

Art Basel – two hundred seventy-one of the best galleries in the world, spread out over an enormous hall and a two-story building. My dear friend Frank folds open the map, grabs his pencil and makes an X to mark the place where we're standing.

'We've got to go about this in a logical way. We'll go straight down this hall and then take the next one back.'

From the corner of my eye I see a light box with a photograph by Jeff Wall. 'Sounds good to me,' I say, 'but first let's take a look at that light box over there.'

'Absolutely not,' says Frank. 'That would spoil everything. We'll get to the light box eventually.'

My heart is pounding. Two hundred seventy-one stands with top-quality work, all waiting for me. I want to see everything. Now. Right away. I want to absorb it all, to look at every painting, every photograph, every sculpture, every video until I disappear into them. I want to be one with all two hundred seventy-one of them – the same person, but in a print run of two hundred seventy-one. No, three or four times two hundred seventy-one, so I can be one with everything that's on display, one with the entire art fair.

But that doesn't fit the logic of the plan. Frank guides me in a straight line from stand to stand, from Thomas Struth to Thomas Ruff, from Shirin Neshat to Cindy Sherman.

I see a photograph by Pieter Laurens Mol: a moving man writing the word 'earth' in a circle on a wall. Frank knows the gallery owner. He introduces me and begins a conversation.

Then my eye falls on a blue photograph of a woman floating. The photo was taken under water; the woman's dress is billowing, just

like her hair. She holds her arm up gracefully and smiles. Who is she dancing with? Is there someone else there, or is she making eyes at the viewer? Is she enticing me?

A little further on there's an enormous painting by Ola Billgren. It's red, light green and darker green and it's called 'Unter einem Baum'. There's no root to be seen, no trunk, no branch, no leaf – and yet it's a tree on a somewhat hazy summer day.

In the adjacent stand is a photo of endless shelves, with the colours yellow, red and blue in constant alternation. It's a supermarket, but not like any supermarket we've ever seen. The yellow, the red and the blue are lighter – even pale – and yet they jump out at you. The colours are there on each shelf, but oddly enough they fail to impart any depth to the photograph. Instead it's flat, as if the scrubbed shelves were above rather than behind each other.

I know the shelves are stocked with chocolate bars. Factory-baked bread, tomato ketchup, orange juice. I even know how much each article costs: 99 cents. It's printed on all the labels. Yet I have great difficulty differentiating the products and shelves. They're all part of the whole, like stones in a wall. I discover a pattern in the colours. Did the photographer leave it up to us to discover the pattern, or did he fill the shelves himself?

Wim Delvoye's photograph of a gleaming marble floor is a work I've already noticed in passing at several galleries. But it's not marble, I see now. It's slices of sausage, ham and other meat products, laid like marble.

Chocolate bars that don't look like chocolate bars, marble that turns out to be meat, a tree without trunk or branches – the works depict

something, but not as it really is. What is it then?

'Frank, what is it then? Frank?'

Frank is gone. No, *I* am gone. And he is where we were, of course. How do I get back there, in God's name?

I look at the paintings and photographs, but not to be absorbed into them. I'm like Hansel, searching for breadcrumbs to find my way back home. My crumbs are still there. I pass the chocolate bars and hurry on to the floor of meat. But this isn't the same floor of meat. Over there: that blue is my dancing water nymph. No, it's not a nymph. It's a Chinese man swimming. I think I see the tree, that bit of red, but it's an Eastern European girl in a red T-shirt.

I race past a steel Louise Bourgeois sign with the text 'Art is a Guarantee for Sanity' written on it. For her it is.

Out of breath, I arrive at a gallery that I think I recognize. I collapse on a couch next to lady in a Burberry raincoat and pull out my map.

*'Entschuldigung, können Sie mir bitte sagen wo ich bin?'*

The lady does not answer but keeps staring straight ahead.

'Could you please tell me where I am?'

Is she suffering from an overdose of art? Jetlag, perhaps? Is she lost, too?

I push the map into her hand, but she doesn't move. Bringing my head up close to hers, I finally understand. The lady isn't real. She's art.

There's the swimming Chinese man again. After a couple of strong strokes he lets himself be carried along. He's floating, but at a fast clip. The water is azure blue and clear – I can't see his face but I know he's enjoying it. I've walked past him five times and he's becoming familiar. That recognition gives me a safe feeling, even though I'm completely lost.

I begin to suspect that I'm passing here accidentally on purpose, that I'm clinging to the floating Chinese man. He doesn't sink.

I also recognize the photograph in the gallery next to the one with the Chinese man. I took it myself: the golden pavilion in a park in Kyoto. Except my photo is lying in a shoebox and this one by De Rijk/De Rooij is hanging on the wall at Galerie Daniel Buchholz of Cologne.

Chunks of ice are floating in the pond, but the trees are green. The water is darker than the cloudy sky, threatening, just like the trees, which are almost black. The sun breaks through momentarily and shines right on the golden temple. A question of luck, of course.

In my photo everything is dark; it was winter then, too. And hordes of school children were jostling each other in front of the lens. Otherwise it's identical.

Is the difference in the technique, the light, the contrast, the control, the patience? Or is the difference just the shoebox?

Why is the photograph of the green wall of a shed hanging at Galerie Ulrich Fiedler and the photo I once took of a red wall around the corner isn't? Is it because I never sent my photo to Fiedler? Or to any other gallery for that matter? Is it because the photograph by Frank Breuer is good and mine just turned out well?

How does he do it? A green wall with vertical slats, under it white skirting and a strip of grass. To the left a light grey road with green trees at the end. But in Breuer's work it's no longer a green wall, or skirting, or grass. They're surfaces in perfect combination. Mondriaan, but photographed.

Was it accidental? Did he happen to walk by and see it? Do you ever accidentally walk past a green industrial shed? Or do you have to look for it?

'Stop by when you're in New York.'

I hear a familiar sound. It's coming from the direction of a grey Buddha's head that measures almost three by three metres. The Buddha speaks Dutch. I look around the partition and there's Frank, in the stand where I left him.

'Say, Han, shall we keep going? Later we'll be coming to Max Protetch. He's got a canvas by Fang Lijun, a Chinese artist who paints swimming men. Gorgeous work. You've got to see it. But first we have to work our way down this row. Otherwise it's chaos.'

I walk behind Frank and do my very best not to notice Jeff Wall's light box in the distance.

'What is it, Frank? What is it?' I ask eagerly as we stop at a photograph that could also be a painting of a watery surface that looks like a sky or a glass wall.

But Frank is talking to Robert Zandvliet, a young Dutch painter whose last exhibition in New York was sold out even before the opening. There's a waiting list for his work. People sign up to buy paintings that don't even exist yet.

I, too, have been searching for one of his works – for months. An existing work, an early work – they're the most beautiful. I've visited his gallery in Amsterdam many times. I've even called his representative in New York several times to ask whether there was anything for me.

Robert extends his hand, the hand that paints the most magnificent landscapes, Holland in green and orange and yellow and black and white. Landscapes that I want, now, immediately. I've got to grab his hand, now that I finally have him. I've got to take him away, out of the art fair, through Basel, onto the plane, and out to his studio. I don't want to let go of this hand until he's painted a landscape for me. 'It must have green and orange in it,' I'll say. 'Only then will I release you.'

I'll be the first artist kidnapper in the world. Maybe I can record

it on video, or photograph it. That way, kidnapping artists will itself become an art form. I'll be even more famous than Robert Zandvliet, who will be reduced to the mere instrument of my art.

There will be waiting lists for my videos and photographs. My work will be sold for astronomical prices on the black market. The whole art world will be up in arms. A long essay will appear in the trend-setting art magazine *Artforum* about what my video is really all about, which clearly will be seen as an indictment of art itself, art against art.

Dozens, hundreds, will imitate me. It will become a school of its own, marking the true beginning of the art of the twenty-first century. The security services will do a land office business. Every artist with the slightest claim to fame will need at least two body guards.

Robert Zandvliet can be part of this new movement. He doesn't know it yet, but he'll be forever grateful. He'll inundate me with green and orange landscapes.

I shake Robert's hand and release it. And then I say, 'Art is a guarantee for sanity.'

The painter looks at me with astonishment.

'Yes, Han is very interested in art.' Frank reacts quickly, as usual. 'But a fair like this is a little overwhelming for him. So many new impressions, so many emotions.'

A little while later I turn around and see that Robert is still standing at the same spot with the same surprised expression on his face.

We pass Art Focus, a chic Swiss gallery, which specializes in Braque, Klee, Léger and Picasso. Sitting, in the private showing room, partitioned off from the public, is an American woman – beige suit, beige coiffure, gold bracelets, diamond rings, bright red nail polish.

I can just see her through the half open door. One of the gallery staff is showing her a painting, an early Picasso. He disappears almost completely behind the painting. Only his head is sticking out at the top at something of an angle.

The American woman straightens her glasses, peers at the painting and then waves her hand. 'Nah,' she says. 'Show me something else.' The gleam of the gigantic diamond in one of her rings is reflected in the lenses of the gallery employee's glasses. He shrinks away, dazzled.

We have one more gallery to go, the Marian Goodman gallery from New York. Finally I'm standing in front of the Jeff Wall light box, and only now can I see what it is: a photograph taken in the Mies van der Rohe pavilion in Barcelona, my favourite building in the city.

'I want it.'

'It's already sold.'

'But I want it.'

'I'm sorry, sir. It's sold.'

'Then show me something else. Show me something else. Right now!'

My watch glitters in the reflection of the light box.



## June 2003 – Bernard Frize

He's hanging on my wall at home. A number of his works are also hanging in the Centraal Museum in Utrecht on my behalf. A few days ago I was sitting next to him at a dinner.

That's never happened to me before, sitting next to someone who's hanging on my wall at home. Every day I look at him. I know his brush strokes, his use of colour, the enigmatic quality of his paintings, some of which could be photographs and at the same time are very much paintings. A few days ago the hand that wields the brush so skilfully was thirty centimetres away from mine. I wanted to touch him for a moment, but I didn't – at an art fair I have trouble controlling myself, but I'm more restrained at the table.

What do you say to someone you live with but with whom you've never exchanged a single word? I love you, you're a genius, I want to have everything you've ever done? Do you say it in French?

He's nice, Bernard Frize. A friendly, modest man. I believe I told him why I find his paintings so beautiful. I'm not entirely sure. My short term memory is still a bit shaky. Maybe that's why I experience everything with such intensity. I can't shift anything to yesterday or postpone anything to tomorrow. Everything is now. Or never. For me there's nothing in between.

Did I discuss this with Bernard Frize? I don't know. All I know is that this lean balding man tended to smile rather shyly and stood up a couple of times to send an SMS to his beloved. I sat with my head in the now and Bernard sat with his head somewhere else, where he'd probably rather be. Could SMSs also be small works of art – rapid strokes, loose and yet fully considered? Would they be lively? Would they move the person who received them?

For a moment I wanted to ask him to send me an SMS, too. I'd save it. Maybe not in a museum, but in a safe place.

When we said goody-bye he thanked me for my support, while actually I wanted to thank him for all the pleasure he gives me, every single day. A friendly, modest man. A master. I'm lucky, and he thanks me for it.

## July 2003 – Really fake

I'm looking at the photograph by Edwin Zwakman that I bought this week. It features a breakfast table in an apartment in a new housing development. The table is covered with a blue-and-white checked cloth; a knife lies across one of the three plates; a crumpled napkin suggests that the inhabitants had to rush from the table to catch their bus. In their haste one of them left behind a sandwich wrapped in a plastic bag.

The morning sun casts a soft glow on the pack of rusks, the chocolate sprinkles and the orange juice; the apricot jam in the glass jar is almost transparent. On the window sill there are plants, a carved stone dove and a cat, also stone, and a cactus shaped like a rabbit. You can see the reflection of the living room in the window, and if you look carefully you can just make out the contours of the photographer.

The warm light, the orange doors with portholes in the houses opposite the apartment, the lace curtains, the chocolate sprinkles – it all makes the photograph so Dutch, so very Dutch.

But the breakfast table isn't a real breakfast table and the apartment isn't a real apartment; everything is staged. The living room and the walk-through dwellings opposite are a model, the light comes from a lamp, and everything that's big is, in reality, small. Zwakman's photograph is not what it seems; what's real is fake.

Zwakman is mixing things up. I did that, too, when I lay in the hospital a year and a half ago. Every day a psychiatrist came to my bedside to ask me what season it was. It was snowing outside and there was a Christmas decoration on my nightstand, but I had no idea what month it was. I told the psychiatrist I didn't answer such stupid questions and I saw the doubt in his eyes. He was wondering whether I really didn't know or whether I was just refusing to say. It was quite

a project, trying to obscure the truth by giving the impression that I was revealing it.

That's just what attracts me about art: unwavering obscurity, confusion. You don't know what it is you're looking at, or you think you know but it's really something else. The psychiatrist thought I was in the hospital because there was something wrong with my brain. What he didn't realize was that he was witnessing a performance; he didn't know that I was imitating Zwakman. I didn't know it myself, to tell the truth.

My 'work of art' cost considerably more than Zwakman's. Whether the value will increase with the passing of time is something I don't know. In Zwakman's case I have no doubt at all.

## September 2003 – Gone

Shirin Neshat is gone. They wanted to borrow her for a little while for an exhibition in Lisbon. Six weeks ago, two men came, wrapped her up in bubble wrap and put her in the wooden crate that would ship her off to Portugal.

I decided to fill the empty wall and hang something else in Shirin's place: a photograph of a building by Barragán, taken by a Japanese photographer. Barragán was a genius and the Japanese photographer is fantastic, too, yet something isn't quite right – everything I hang in Shirin's place isn't Shirin.

People stand in front of the photograph of the building by Barragán and sigh that it's so beautiful, the lines, the colour, the reflective red. They ask whether it's a photograph or a painting. I shake my head, thinking wistfully of what really should be hanging here. Will ill they take good care of Shirin in Lisbon? Is she hanging nicely? Doesn't she find it a bit unfamiliar there? She's so used to our house, the view of the book cases and the patio, the white couch at her feet.

What will she look out on in Lisbon? And do they know there why this photograph is so special? The men dressed in black on the beach, moving in silence. Beige, blue, black. The sea, the air, space, light. Only those who look carefully can see that the men are carrying a bier with a body inside wrapped in white. Do the people look carefully in Lisbon? Better than I?

In a week she'll be back. Seven more nights and she can come back home. After that she's never going away again. Shirin misses her familiar surroundings too much, and I just can't do that to her.

## November 2003 – Snow on a summer evening

It's been hanging in our living room for about three years: the photograph of a black tent in a snowy landscape, with a setting sun in the background turning the sky purple. There was something about the series of tents in the snow by the Icelandic artist Hrafnkell Sigurdsson that seized my attention right from the start. They express a certain desolation, a desolation that became part of me a long time ago. The driving force in my life is the search for the antidote to this loneliness.

I know exactly when I became aware of this feeling. It was a warm summer evening. I was ten years old and I was standing in front of our house on the imposing avenue on which we lived. The striped awnings were hanging down, as if the house had shut its eyes from a sun that was already almost out of sight. Despite the fine weather the street was empty and our house looked uninhabited, while my three brothers and my sister were in their rooms and my mother was resting on the couch until my father came back from the office.

It was still, deathly still. Suddenly it came over me. It started at my feet and crept slowly up to my stomach: a chill that burned, a freezing that did not fade. On the contrary, I heard everything more sharply – the warbling of the birds, the talking in the distance, the buzzing of a bee, a dog barking somewhere far away. I smelled everything more acutely – the leaves on the trees, the moist grass, the sweet evening light. So heavy did that balmy evening weigh on me that my legs began to tremble and I had to sit down on the edge of the doorstep.

It was not only the heavy feeling itself that had pushed me down, but it was the knowledge that this would never go away again, that it had nestled inside me, to fuse forever with the person I would become. I knew that I would have to find a place that had nothing in

common with this one: a place in the world that wasn't so frighteningly deserted, where people were meant to live, not so horrifyingly quiet, where life was meant to flourish.

The work by Sigurdsson is about to leave for the museum where it will be on loan. I look for one last time at the white snow, the black tent, the air that threatens to darken. And I know: through the works I buy I show what I've been running from.

## January 2004 – The waiting room

I'm sitting in the doctor's waiting room amid the timeless furniture, the three-day-old newspaper and the awkward silence. I'm reading a book, but the words pass right through my head. I'm taking notes, but my thoughts are elsewhere. Every action in the waiting room is a diversionary tactic that is doomed to failure from the start.

Waiting is being condemned to doing nothing. You live in a vacuum between daily life and the not-so-daily life that's about to happen. All you can do is kill time.

This hovering between two worlds is a comfortable escape in an airport lounge, but in the doctor's waiting room it's torture. After the waiting you're forced into passivity once again. You're handed over to someone else who torments you for your own good. To someone who tells you whether you're going to spend the rest of your life lame or half blind. Someone who tells you if there's going to be a rest of your life at all. And you have to pay for all this.

While there's calming music in the airport lounge, in the doctor's waiting room I always hear the shriek of a drill.

You can't exactly talk to the other people waiting here about the *unheimische* of waiting. By starting a conversation you're letting people know that waiting is tough on you, that you're nervous about the unknown that's coming your way, you admit that you're weak and vulnerable. All this is a breach of waiting room etiquette, which requires that we pretend we're not waiting.

The deep sigh, the waiting sigh, the glance at the watch, even the complaint directed at no one in particular that it certainly is taking a long time: these are all desperate attempts to break through the ominous silence, veiled invitations to converse. Some of the others

waiting here – who aren't such amateurs, who've mastered the art of waiting – pretend they can't hear the silent cry for help. A few nod out of compassion and mutter something, but there's never a real talk about how powerless and dependent we feel. That would only serve to emphasize our powerlessness and dependence. It would break through the illusion that there's nothing wrong here. Because of that taboo, people who wait can expect little support from one another. We're all waiting, but each is waiting alone.

The waiting room is so alienating that we don't even address acquaintances at a normal tone. Speaking at a whisper, we ask how it's going at home or at work, we talk quietly, supposedly so as not to disturb the others who are waiting. But if that were the real reason, then people would also whisper in trams, trains and other public spaces.

We whisper in the doctor's waiting room because the normal world, in which we actually have something to do and still cherish the illusion of control, is not admitted here. We have been handed over to a higher power, just like in church. And in a museum. We whisper there, too, where a higher power is also present, although it's usually a bit less terrifying.

Perhaps these two ought to link up somehow: art and the doctor's waiting room. After all, if you've got to keep quiet it might as well be for something that can offer a bit of solace.

Art in the doctor's waiting room – balm for sick souls. Not only in the AMC but also in Tytsjerksteradiel and Venlo, in Rosas and Murcia. No Van Gogh reproduction, no weeping gypsy girl on black velvet, no ceramics made by an artistic aunt, but real art, works that are changed on a regular basis.

Maybe I can place something from my growing collection with a GP in

Dordrecht, in the district hospital in Overijssel and with my internist in Badalona. That way the patients, I being one of them, would have something to look at – something that not only distracts us but also takes us somewhere else.

The photograph by Paul Kooiker, the painting by Robert Zandvliet and the minimalistic sculpture by Karin Sander would be bound to evoke reactions. And I'd be able to break through the silence, even in my absence.

## July 2004 – Access for all

A group of school children shuffle through the chic Queen's Gallery in Bangkok. They stop in front of a work by Shirin Neshat: two entwined hands that are decorated with Iranian motifs. The hands show solidarity and strength.

The teacher says something. I can't hear what it is, but I see a girl with long black hair and a Hello Kitty bag nod vigorously.

There's never before been an exhibition on AIDS in Asia. People seldom even mention the subject. But this year the International AIDS Conference is being held here in Bangkok and I thought art might play a role.

I'm financing an exhibition with work about HIV/AIDS made by local artists. Curator Hilde Teerlinck and I also asked ten internationally known artists to make something especially for this event. All of them said yes, and now there are ten magnificent works hanging here by General Idea, Lawrence Weiner, Rirkrit Tiravanija and several others.

The names of the artists probably don't mean anything to the students, but the children are giving the works their full attention.

The teacher walks up to me. In his best English, he asks, 'Excuse me, but how do you look at art?' Such a simple and elementary question. He's touched the very essence of relating to art: how do we look at it? For me there's only one way: you look with your heart. The more you look, the more the work will tell you.

And so dozens of classes pass by Shirana Shahbazi, Jef Geys and Leandro Erlich. In the weekends whole families come, with children and grandpas and grandmas. Not because the Thai are so interested

in contemporary art, but because the air conditioning in The Queen's Gallery is set at twenty degrees Celsius while outside it's over thirty. Even so, most visitors to our exhibition *Access for All* have probably never talked about AIDS, and now they're standing here and there's no getting around it.

I'm seeing it with my own eyes: art really does change things. ArtAids, my foundation whose purpose is to motivate people to break through the HIV stigma, is born.

## December 2004 – Stephen Shore

One photograph shows an almost abandoned street, a row of parking meters, a low, dark sky. The flaking marquee of a movie theatre, closed for good. Two men are standing on a sidewalk as if they were frozen.

Other photographs show empty parking lots, and a parking lot full of empty cars. The effect is just as desolate.

One minute later I'm standing in front of a half-full bathtub. The plastic curtain is hanging just over the edge; you can see the water is lukewarm. Lying on a scratched table top is a half eaten hamburger.

The photographs by Stephen Shore are not about the houses, streets and trees but about forms, lines and patterns. The streets and buildings are areas of colour, a telephone pole is a thin, black line. This turns everyday scenes into abstract images that tell us something not only about what can be seen but also about what is missing.

What the photos allude to more than anything else is the emphatic absence of people. They *were* here – a few minutes ago someone took a bite out of the hamburger, someone ran water in the bathtub. Five minutes ago people were walking down the street. We've just missed them. There was life here up until a minute ago, but not anymore.

It makes me think of myself as an eight-year-old boy, sitting in my attic room and hearing children playing outside. They laughed and shouted to each other. I wanted to be with them. I wanted to run down the stairs, but something held me back. It was just like the recurring dream I had in which I wanted to walk but couldn't get anywhere. But I wasn't sleeping; I was wide awake. All I had to do to open my bedroom door was to take one step, but my legs wouldn't obey me. It was as if they were glued to the linoleum floor. And my arms, too, hung there slack and motionless.

By the time I finally freed myself, tore down the stairs two steps at a time, pulled open the front door and ran outside without my jacket, the children were gone. I looked around the corner of the street, but they had really disappeared.

We're too late, Stephen Shore and I. If only we had run faster, taken the stairs three steps at a time, maybe we would have made it.

## June 2005 – The suspended moment

I'm walking by myself through a former school in the town of Altkirch, France. This is where the CRAC d'Alsace art centre is now located, where the opening of the first exhibition of works from the H+F Collection will take place in one hour.

The guests have not yet arrived. One CRAC employee is in the hall working on some preparations, but otherwise I'm alone, alone for the first time with the works from my collection.

They look different than they did in the gallery or at the art fair where I bought them. Here they have plenty of room. They're hanging on a wall alone or in pairs, and daylight is shining through the big schoolroom windows. Here my works can breathe.

I've never seen these works together. Some of them I haven't seen at all since I bought them; they immediately went on loan to museums, where some still haven't been shown to the public. Now I'm surprised at how seamlessly they fit together, as if they were bought with each other in mind.

I know these works, but even so, it's as if I'm seeing them here for the first time, as if the images had nestled down in me the moment I bought the works and now they're ripe. This is largely thanks to the curator of the exhibition, Hilde Teerlinck. We've worked together for years. Every day, our e-mails go back and forth between France and Spain, filled with ideas. Hilde feels what I feel, sees what I see. In fact, she sees more, as the exhibition clearly shows.

There's 'Deadheading', the work by Otto Berchem that consists of a pedestal with a vase of flower stems whose blooms have been cut off. The flower petals are lying in a colourful carpet around the pedestal. In the same gallery are photographs by Jörg Sasse in which elements from several different photographs are brought together in nonexistent landscapes that often express emptiness and absence.

Further on is a work by Bernard Frize, a grid of horizontal and vertical lines painted in different colours, next to a painting by the Spanish artist Prudencio Irazabal in which the colours run into one other. The two works contrast each other, but at the same time they also complement each other. And even further is a work by Paul Kooiker, a photograph that also could have been a painting, a painting that fits in with the other works in terms of colour and form.

In a separate gallery is a series by Victor Boulet: four photographs taken in a horse hospital. A large white horse is lying against a black dropcloth with bound legs and a tube in his mouth. I see the muscles, I feel both the strength and the vulnerability, which can also be seen in the other photographs of horses that are anaesthetized or being operated on.

Hanging high on the corridor walls are nine round light boxes by Jeff Wall featuring children from all over the world against cloudy landscapes. It's as if the 'Little Children' really were floating in the air.

*The suspended moment.* Hilde thought up the title for this exhibition. 'What do you think?' she asked in an e-mail. 'Yes,' I answered immediately, 'that's it!' She saw the similarities between the various works that I had bought mainly on sheer intuition. That intuition shows what's driving me. Besides the love of beauty and my penchant for the aesthetic, I want to seize time; I want to grab the moments as they pass and hold them close. That never works in everyday life, of course, except when I write – only art can seize the moment. Hilde is able to bring that art together.

I stand in front of one of the little sculptures by Karin Sander. It's an exact replica of someone who has undergone a body scan, made on a scale of 1 to 10. The plastic 'Doctor Emmerling' is eighteen centimetres high, standing there with his hands in the pockets of his jeans.



Outside there's the sound of a horn. The bus with visitors from Art Basel, which is also taking place now, has arrived. They stream in, the gallery owners, museum directors, artists, collectors, journalists, critics, art lovers. I step aside and go stand in a corner so I can keep an eye on Doctor Emmerling.

Now *The suspended moment* is theirs.

## November 2005 – The newspaper

I'm kneeling at the toilet, and with every recollection of the article that just appeared in *NRC Handelsblad* another wave of nausea comes rolling up from my stomach. How could I have been so stupid as to agree to this interview? Yet there it is, in the newspaper, in black and white: Han Nefkens donates 200 thousand euros a year to Museum Boijmans van Beuningen. Han Nefkens buys an installation by Olafur Eilasson, with an estimated market value of .... Colossal amounts are printed right there in the *NRC* next to my name. I'm filled with shame, as if I had appeared in the paper buck naked.

For five years I worked on my art projects in the strictest anonymity. I was a fly on the wall, small and invisible – and that's the way I wanted it. You don't make a show of such things. You don't let other people know that you have money. When you give, give in silence – that's what I was taught.

But another force has been awakened in me in recent months – a force that wants to let other people in on my passion. If they were to find out how much pleasure I take in contributing to something special, then many more people might become involved – not only in museums but also in medical and scientific research, in their local neighbourhood park, in the world.

I had thought that the first feeling – the embarrassment – was the dominant one. But not long ago when I was asked if I was willing to be interviewed about my art activities, I didn't say no. Was it because I thought I would be able to avoid the subject of figures? Did I think the journalist would mainly be interested in my motives and in how my joint ventures actually work? Why did I answer when she asked about amounts of money, when I really didn't want to make it public?

Now there I am, in the newspaper: a rich man who gives away money on art. And it knocked me for a loop.

But why? Is it something to be ashamed of? And if it really is, why did I consent to the interview?

It's as if my unconscious had taken over and forced me to come out of the closet. My previous coming-out were less difficult. Letting people know I was gay was no problem, and I wasn't ashamed of being HIV positive, either. But talking about money can be interpreted as bragging, which is totally out of place in the Calvinist culture that apparently has had much more of an impact on me than I thought.

The longer I think about it, the more I realize what it is about the article that bothers me: the emphasis on money, while money alone is meaningless. You have to know what you want, and you have to be able to select people with whom you can achieve that goal. Vision, persistence and the ability to work together are just as important to the success of a project as money. If one of those elements is missing, you don't get anywhere.

But for the newspaper vision and drive are apparently less sexy.

The waves of nausea finally stop and I sit down on the toilet seat. Yesterday my life changed. No, that's not right: yesterday I changed my life. I'm no longer hiding behind my art project. I've become visible.

I still feel naked and vulnerable. But I'll get used to it, and I'll learn to stand up for what I do. To stand up for who I am.

## December 2005 – Art Camp

My heart is brimming, and it's running all over my keyboard. Images of the Art Camp that my foundation ArtAids organized two weeks ago in Thailand are still fresh in my mind. Accompanied by thirty-five little Thai children, all of them HIV positive, and forty attendants, I went to the beach at Pattaya to try my hand at painting.

I'm now seven thousand kilometres away, but I can still clearly see the bulldog pin in Muk's jet-black hair. And the heels of her pink plastic shoes, so high she can scarcely walk in them.

I can hear the excited shouts of Jeeranak as he catches a glimpse of the sea for the first time in his life. He runs up to the water's edge but is visibly shaken when the water splashes against his knees. Recoiling for just a moment, he takes a running jump and dives into the waves, clothes and all.

Two little friends spend the whole day doing nothing but zooming up and down in the elevator of the hotel's enormous atrium lobby. They wave to me and I wave back. At each floor they grow smaller until I cannot see them at all.

Dangling from the neck of the little girl with the bead rings is a name plate written in those decorative Thai letters that I can't read. Only later do I learn that my plate says "Doctor Han". This patient has to go all the way to Thailand just to be a doctor for a few days.

On the other hand, the children can't read the English texts that are written on their street market T-shirts. *'Marihuana girl - she traded her body for drugs and a good time'* is emblazoned across the chest of an eight-year-old girl. *'I called in sick so many times, next time I'll call in DEAD'* announces the green T-shirt worn by Muk, whose arms still bear the marks of a recent skin infection. Every time our eyes

meet she laughs at me in that typical Thai way - shy and captivating at the same time.

The T-shirts we've all been given - white for the children, black for the attendants - are printed with the weekend's battle cry: '*rakai*', long live life. *Rakai* is also printed on Siriporn's cap. She's turned up the brim at a coquettish angle. Around her wrist are three braided bracelets, exactly like those worn by many high-second students in Amsterdam, London and Barcelona. Focusing all her attention, she applies coral blue and yellow paint to her piece of batik cloth: a slender mermaid washed up on the beach in Pattaya.

A doctor who has come here especially from Bangkok will tell her this evening that what she was admitted for a month ago was not an allergy but the same virus that her mother had fought against - and lost.

Her grandfather doesn't let her out of his sight for minute. He keeps his red jacket on all day, as if he's still cold despite the tropical heat. He momentarily rests his hand on her shoulder. Is it to let her know he's still there, or to convince himself that she hasn't left yet?

We've got an assignment to paint a heart containing eight things that are important to us. I usually go to an expert to figure out what it is I'm feeling, but these children have no need of experts. They paint red, green and bright orange hearts with laughing faces, a fish, a car, a house, a flower, a star, a doctor, a cat and a palm tree. A little boy paints a heart with yellow prison bars, then quickly throws a blob of paint over it so that only a dark spot remains.

Jeeranak paints a big purple heart, and inside it he paints his father, his mother and his oldest brother. They're all gone. A little while later he goes to sit beside a low wall with his back to the others, staring at

the sea. I want to walk over and bump fists with him, as we did earlier today, but something holds me back. I can't do it. Instead I frantically start taking pictures in an effort to hold on to him.

Looking through the lens I'm shocked to see that far away no longer exists. Far away is close, much too close.

## January 2006 – Blended images

Because almost all my works of art are housed in museums, I only see them when they're being exhibited. That's why every morning I go to visit my website. Today, after clicking on [hfcollection.org](http://hfcollection.org), I see a car standing on a field of snow. It's a still from the video 'Is This Guilt in You Too – [The Study of a Car in a Field]' by Ryan Gander.

I bought this video in 2005 at Art Basel and I was immediately struck by this image: it could be the beginning of a Hollywood thriller. A woman's voice describes what's being shown; she suggests interpretations, she talks about how the art world works, she wonders how real the image is. I can't hear her very well. Since my attack of encephalitis it's hard for me to listen to spoken text while I'm looking at an image.

I provide my own commentary. The sound of my own questions is louder than that of the voiceover. How did that car get there? How come there are no wheel tracks? Was it there before it started snowing? Is it a technical trick?

These are questions I could ask about many works in my collection. What's real and what isn't? What are you seeing? And what does it mean?

As I look at the image on my computer screen another one occurs to me: that of an old car that I saw a few years ago while visiting a pagoda in Vietnam. In one of the rooms behind the pagoda was the light blue Austin ('heavenly blue' is what that colour is called) that the monk Thich Quang Duc drove to Saigon in 1963. There he set himself on fire to protest the corrupt regime of President Diem. The photograph of the burning monk, with his car in the background – hood open – appeared on the front pages of all the newspapers. The same photo has

now been placed against the car's windshield. I rested my hand for a moment on the now closed hood.

I still remember how, as a nine-year-old boy, I scarcely dared look at the photo, and at the same time it fascinated me. That feeling has not changed. Would Thich Quang Duc have used the gas from the gas tank to set fire to himself? Or would he have hidden a jerry can of gas under the hood? Did he leave the hood open by accident because he was in a hurry, and a bit nervous? Or was he trying to say something with it? Was the open hood a signal, a flag? And what would the monk have felt? Why didn't he instinctively stand up and run away as soon as he felt the flames? Had he completely detached himself from all earthly matter?

The saying 'A picture tells a thousand stories' is absolutely not true. The image on my computer screen and the image in my mind evoke a thousand questions, while the snow-covered landscape by Ryan Gander slowly blends into the tropical image in my memory.

## June 2006 – Green candies

As I write, I'm playing with the two green candies on my desk. I stroke them, smell them, bite them through their glistening wrappers. They're part of a work of art by Felix Gonzalez-Torres that consists of a whole mountain of green candies. Everyone's free to help themselves and the owner keeps replenishing them. The gallery owner said I could help myself to a few candies, as many as I wanted. What I wanted was to take all five thousand, but that would have been a bit indiscreet. So I took three.

The gallery owner also showed me another work: a photograph of two empty beach chairs cut out like a jigsaw puzzle, from 1991. 'Untitled' is what the work is called, 'Untitled (Last time)'. I don't know who may have sat in those chairs, but I miss them. The empty chairs speak of loss, loss and confusion through the bits of cut-up picture.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres has given form to what he knew and what he felt. It's a strong form that lives on, even after the photographer himself was struck down twelve years ago by the virus I fight against every day. He said it all in one picture, and I am free to guess what happened. The power of Gonzalez-Torres is that he knew what he had to leave out to make his story real.

Perhaps the chairs in the photograph belonged to him and his friend, who died two years before he did. Perhaps they're just two empty beach chairs. It doesn't matter. It's his chair and mine.

Art releases the most beautiful things there are in a person as well as the most terrible. It's like love. There's no difference. You think the other person was made for you, for you alone. You think he would be distraught without you, and that all you have to do is convince him of this simple truth. You want the other person to be your very own,

forever – if he's gone, the whole world is empty. Six billion people aren't enough to make up for that single loss.

The beach chairs miss the two who once inhabited them, and my two candies miss their four thousand nine hundred ninety-eight comrades. With his one picture, Felix Gonzalez-Torres has succeeded in saying more than I could ever say in three hundred ninety-seven words.

## June 2006 – White is the Colour

Slowly the clouds drift from the corner of the exhibition hall to the ceiling, where they hover before disappearing through the wall, only to reappear on the other side of the room.

I raise my hand to greet the eight-year-old boy who is stretched out in the meadow in front of his house in a Rotterdam suburb, gazing at the sky. The clouds tell a story meant for him alone. It's the story of a boy who goes on a journey because the world is calling him. Floating above him is a vast country with a wavy coastline and white, downy mountains, a heavenly bed in a land where nothing hurts. That's where he's going to go.

The clouds keep changing shape and they move quickly. They're hurrying to tell the boy their story, their story that is his story.

He sees a giant with a big hat and a bird who invites him to fly with him. From the back of the cloud-bird the meadow seems even smaller than his handkerchief, and the houses on the Lindesingel are as big as the blocks he played with that afternoon in his attic room.

Then suddenly the sky turns clear blue, just for a moment, as if the clouds had to stop and think about how the rest of the story goes. But it doesn't last long. Soon a ship comes sailing along in full sail. The captain has a pipe in his mouth, and he waves to him. The boy has to climb on board and sail across the ocean to that woolly land where boys never have to go to school and you don't get punished for lying in the meadow on a weekday morning.

In that land the weather is always fine and the children play outside until their mothers call them to eat. Chocolate pudding with whipped cream and strawberries on rusks is the main course.

'The aim of the video projections by Diana Thater is to offer the

experience of the encounter between time – the playing time of the video – and space – the architecture on which the images are projected.'

I'm startled by a thin girl who's leading a group of visitors around. A woman nods respectfully as if she had just walked into church. A boy with his hair combed straight back tilts his head, as if that might help him see the work better. A girl in a flowered skirt is busily writing something in her notebook, the tip of her tongue protruding from her mouth.

'The interesting thing is that people think these are clouds, when in reality it's the smoke from fires that were started to make this work. In doing this the artist wants to show that ...'

I turn around and walk away. I'll be back tomorrow, and then hopefully I won't be disturbed by people who think reality is more interesting than the imagination.

## July 2006 – Disappearance of a Tribe

I've already been sitting for an hour in a Paris gallery, watching the film by Deimantas Narkevičius that I've just bought: 'Disappearance of a Tribe'. It consists of shots of photographs that were taken during the forties, fifties and sixties of members of the artist's Lithuanian family. I've already seen the film twice, but I can't get enough of it. Images without text, without explanation and with no other sound than soft music: that's the best way to see it. With images like this I can just drift off, as I do so often in my day-to-day existence. Except reality usually breaks in and whistles me back. An image belongs to a particular situation and must be inserted into that situation, while I would much rather devise my own reality – or rather: realities – in connection with everything I see. But with this film I can fantasize to my heart's content. No one is going to rap my knuckles.

In one of the photos there are nurses standing in front of a grey building, which is undoubtedly the hospital where they work. One of them has climbed into a bare tree. That must be the artist's mother. Another photo shows the faces of four young men, three close to the camera and one in the background. The men look like factory workers or sailors. They're not looking into the lens, but I can tell by their eyes that they are very conscious of being photographed. They're brothers, I think. They resemble each other a bit: the father and uncles of Deimantas.

In another photo six women and one man are posing on a hill. The women are wearing flowered dresses with short sleeves. I think I recognize the nurses from the earlier photo. And the man in swimming trunks on the dune is one of the factory workers or sailors who looked away from the lens. This must have been how the artist's parents met, during an excursion with friends from work. This is where he comes from.

A following image shows a procession of people dressed in heavy coats and walking behind a car to a church. Is that the funeral of a family member? Has one of the people from the tribe disappeared? Or by 'Disappearance of a Tribe' does Deimantas Narkevičius mean a way of life, under a communist regime, that no longer exists?

When Narkevičius looks at old photographs, does he get the feeling that for just a moment he is stepping into a life that's long gone, as I do? For a moment the vanished time been restored. For a moment, then is now.

Maybe that's why this work so appeals to me: it's about things that have passed, but because you can keep looking at the film over and over again, you have the idea that this past is still very close. What no longer exists is made almost palpable by the editing and rhythm of the film, as my fantasies are a reality for me.

I leave the gallery and walk into the Paris summer, along the broad boulevard where people are sitting at sidewalk cafés and enjoying the sun. And here, too, the disappeared tribe and the stories are still united in my head.

## October 2006 – Le Miroir

Once again, I start my morning with a quick visit to the website of the H+F Collection before starting to write, to enjoy the four random works that are displayed on the homepage. It's accidental, yet there is a similarity between the photographs by, say, Gerco de Ruijter, Dorothé Meyer, Hans van der Meer and Sam Taylor-Wood that are now appearing on my screen.

This still surprises me. Does my computer sense it? Does it have a feel for aesthetics? If someone else who had no interest in art were to click on my site, would different combinations appear, or combinations of images that don't reinforce but weaken each other, combinations that clash? Is there such an obvious coherence within the works in my collection that it doesn't matter what you choose, it always fits in with the other works? Or do I experience it this way because my eyes see the works with so much love?

Today the work 'Le Miroir' by the Finnish artist Elina Brotherus appears on my screen. It consists of a series of photographs of a naked woman looking in a mirror. In each photograph the mirror is a bit less steamed up and the contours of the woman – the artist herself – become more clearly visible. On the sink are two toothbrushes in a glass, and next to this are toothpaste, deodorant and facial cream.

Suddenly I wonder why I bought these photographs a few years ago in Paris. They're poetic, they evoke questions, it's a series – all aspects that attract me. But only now that I have the photos on my screen do I understand what the real reason was for my purchase.

Fifteen years ago, a few months before his death, my brother Victor stood naked in front of the steamed up mirror in his apartment in Rotterdam. Gradually the steam evaporated, so that the mirror image of his scrawny body became visible, his sunken cheeks, which

at the time was the signal that someone was suffering from AIDS. I looked at him, he looked at himself, neither of us said a word.

Is that why I added this series to my collection, even though I'd really rather not think about the past? I want to live in the now, I'm marching into the future. It's pointless to focus on the past; it's pointless and it's much too painful.

How could I have chosen these pictures? They force me to think about that time, while I was doing such a good job of forgetting. But now I feel the sadness again of being cut off, the shock that the unthinkable really happens and that no one is safe, no matter how well you hide. Once again I feel that anger at life for leaving Victor in the lurch, the almost paralyzing fear that I'll be next.

I remember how, during his funeral, I sucked the cool outside air deep into my lungs and said aloud to myself: you're still alive, they're not getting you down there.

I try to let go of Victor. I latch onto life, hold it so hard against me that it leaves marks on my skin – scars that make me happy, because I still have time, and he doesn't.

I should never have bought 'Le Miroir'. I've got to get on with my life.



## October 2007 – Overnight stay

‘Why don’t you open up your own museum, Mr Nefkens?’

The presenter looks me straight in the eyes over the microphone. I’m a guest on an hour-long radio programme *Kunststof*.

My own museum. I can see it all now – a white, sterile building. Somewhere in the distance there’s the hollow sound of the curator’s high heels. She’s pacing back and forth because tomorrow is the opening of our new exhibition.

My own museum. A dead, white space that I myself would have to breathe life into, hoping that people will come and look. What a difference between that and a museum that’s already alive and bustling, one to which I can contribute. I think about the meetings at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, with the seven of us bending over a project to which dozens of people will ultimately contribute, where everyone has his input, where I’m part of a bigger whole.

When I was a child, nothing was more fun than an overnight stay. It was exciting to walk into another life at my grandparents’ home in Geneva, a life that I could step back out of a couple of days later. In my grandparents’ apartment it smelled different: of the meat that had been roasted that day, my grandmother’s heavy perfume, my grandfather’s cigars, the lilacs on the sideboard. It smelled of a foreign country.

On the cabinet beside my bed was a little dish decorated with yellow roses, and in it were chocolates. I was allowed to go to bed later and I could get up whenever I liked.

My grandparents had furniture that was different than ours, big and decorated with fandangles that, as I knew, my father didn’t like. In the living room there was an enormous brown velvet sofa with cushions you sunk into, whereas we had an Italian couch with a hard back. The wallpaper here was striped. Ours was beige. And the paintings on the

walls were different, bigger, and with complicated frames. Hanging from the ceiling was a crystal chandelier. On warm days, when the windows were open, a breeze would set the crystal in motion, making a glassy tinkling noise that sounded like water in a brook.

Everything at my grandparents’ was different than it was at home, yet I was part of it. *That’s* what I look for in the museum and art institutes I work with. If I were to build my own museum, I’d never have that special feeling of simultaneous distance and involvement.

And then there’s all the fuss: the insurance, the installation, the administration, the dozens of details. Now it all looks after itself. I can concentrate completely on what I like best: ideas for exhibitions and presentations.

And that’s why, here in the radio studio, I tell the presenter: ‘No, Mr van der Linden, having my own museum isn’t for me. I’d rather spend the night elsewhere.’

## January 2008 – Waiting

‘All art is waiting,’ wrote the French philosopher Simone Weil. For waiting is the condition that allows us to look at the world, at ourselves and at the other with complete attention. ‘Waiting is the transformation of time into eternity.’

I’m astonished whenever I read this. If Weil is right, then how is it possible that an impatient person like me should feel such an affinity with art? I never have time to stand still. I’m always on the run, as if I wanted to cram a whole life into every hour.

Then all at once I realize that the few moments when I do stop to rest are the moments when I’m standing before a work of art. The otherwise so frenetic time suddenly comes to a halt, the ticking of the clock falls silent.

I think about how I was able to stand in front of the photographs by Uta Barth for hours on end when they were being shown at the *Whisper not!* exhibition in 2006 at Huis Marseille, the museum at which they are now on loan. I was especially captivated by the series ‘white blind (bright red)’, which was chosen especially for one room in Huis Marseille in consultation with the artist. The series consists of fourteen photographs of the same tree taken from a window: bare branches with a red flower here and there. Sometimes the image is completely overexposed, making it very difficult to discern any form at all. Some of the photos look so much like each other that you can only see the difference by studying them very closely. You’ve really got to search, the way I loved to do when I was a boy, studying the ‘find the differences’ pictures in the newspaper. I kept on sitting until I had found all the differences. I did it then, I did it forty-five years later and I’m still doing it.

Only now, reflecting on the words of Simone Weil, do I begin to understand what she means. I lose myself in looking. Everything

else disappears and the noise of life slips into the background, and that’s how I find myself. For me, looking at art has become waiting, the silence in a restless existence.

## June 2008 – *No References*

José Teunissen and I are walking through the Arnhem Fashion Biennale. We're looking for someone who might qualify for the first H+F Fashion Award: a prize for a fashion designer who works on the cutting edge of fashion and art. The winner will be given twenty thousand euros to produce a work, and we will make sure that the work is shown and that a catalogue is produced to accompany it. José is the former fashion curator at the Centraal Museum and is now professor at the ArtEZ fashion academy in Arnhem. She and I have been working together for years. She put me in touch with Viktor & Rolf and with Hussein Chalayan, and since then I've financed work of theirs that demonstrated the source of their inspiration but fell outside their couture collections. Those works – you can hardly call them 'dresses' – were then given to the Centraal Museum on loan.

But I want more. I know that many fashion designers have an idea in their head that they can't execute because it's not commercially remunerative. With the H+F Fashion Award I want to make that fantasy a reality.

We see several candidates for the prize at the Fashion Biennale. Their designs border on art, they're daring and unusual, and their form and execution jump out at you, as do the ideas behind them. But then I make out the contours of a deer, or is it a woman? It appears to be a mannequin with a black-and-white checked cape on which a deer is attached that is draped over the mannequin's shoulders. It's fashion, but it's also a walking installation. It's unbridled fantasy. Whoever came up with this idea will certainly be able to go one step further. That's what we're looking for.

A few weeks later José and I are in Brussels, visiting the shop of

Christophe Coppens, the designer of the deer cape. I'm sitting in a chair whose arms culminate in lion's heads. Everywhere you look there are stuffed animals, and furniture in shapes that far exceed every style or classification. In the studio behind the shop, women in white dusters are sewing and stitching. One of them bends far over to get a better look at the hat she's working on.

Christophe is happy with the prize, surprised. He asks once again if he really can make whatever he wants. Yes, as long as it's within the budget.

He takes us to the basement where there's an enormous doll house that was part of an exhibition a few years ago. You can tell from the shape, the lighting and the way the details are executed that Christophe went to theatre school and then spent some time working in the theatre. The doll house is ominous, dark, forbidding. When you open the little doors you see bloody and terrifying scenes that make you think of the Dutroux affair.

Will his new work be something like this? Christopher doesn't know yet. He's no closer to deciding when we come for our next visit. But he takes us out to a fish restaurant around the corner.

'What I'd really like to do is throw everything overboard. All references to my own work, all references to books, to artists, references within the fashion worlds, references to materials, techniques and form,' he says while taking a bite out of a stuffed tomato. 'I want to take another look at the purpose of the accessory. I want the imagination to take over.'

I nod, but my mind is blank.

'What's a colour? What's a shape?' Christophe continues. 'What is fashion? What is a body?'

I have no answer to these questions. What is something without a frame of reference? Isn't that like a person without memory, as I was almost seven years ago? How is he going to express this? I find it

suspenseful, pleasantly suspenseful.

In the months that follow José and I are sent sketches – sketches of strange shapes with lines and arrows pointing from one to the other. I can't visualize it, but I have complete faith in Christophe and I'm very curious as to the results.

In December it's ready. Christophe's work, *No References*, is being shown at Platform 21 in Amsterdam. It's a cold day, but inside it's warm. I climb the stairs to what once was a large, round chapel, and walk into heaven. Placed on low tables are parts of shop window dummies: heads, arms, legs, thighs, fitted with decorations that are all connected to each other. There are thirty-three couture accessories, illuminated by low-hanging lamps. Attached to one leg is a treadmill, attached to another half leg is a garter. Cavities are filled with material: protruding from a head is an enormous tongue spitting out bits of fabric, another dummy head has two horns at the shoulders, like enormous ears.

They're abstract forms, but recognizable. The whole thing suggests a studio as theatre décor, or more than that: a studio as a play. It feels like a dream that has become reality.

At the same time, it *is* a studio. The women in white dusters who are standing and sitting among the dummies are busy sewing and embroidering. Christophe himself will also be here a few times in the coming weeks to continue working on the piece, and people who are so inclined and who possess the necessary skills are invited to help.

*No References* is a work in progress, a work that will never be finished. Yet it constitutes an entity. It's many forms make it dynamic, the light colours make it peaceful, and the use of material and the presence of people make it lively.

Christophe has succeeded in producing something without reference to anything else. But I know for sure that in the future this

installation itself will be a reference. *No References* itself is clearly a reference.

## July 2008 – Bangkok love ball

‘Do you want to dance, Khun Han?’ The young Thai curator of our exhibition gives me a shy smile.

‘Yes, I do, Chattiya.’

But I’m already dancing. Everyone is dancing in this Bangkok disco during the ArtAids love ball. There’s really no dance floor here. You just move wherever you happen to be.

We organized this party as part of the ArtAids event *More to Love*, which is being held at five different locations in the city. The club is packed with young Thai: lovely slender girls with straight black hair, like Chattiya, and boys in white sneakers with their caps on backwards to look cool. Among them are the Thai and European artists whose work we’re showing at the various exhibitions, and the staff and board members of ArtAids. We, the ArtAids people, are by far the oldest.

Videos are being projected on the wall that were made by the VJ, Gerald van der Kaap: red, purple and yellow images, almost fluid, alternating with shots of condoms and young people making love. The music is so loud that talking is pointless unless you’re a good lip reader, but it’s difficult for me with the Thai-English that people speak here.

As I bob to the music, images from the past few days pass through my mind. I see before me the Thai princess who opened the big exhibition at Chulalongkorn University. I led her past the works and caught a hint of perfume, Chanel No. 5. I saw the white powder on her face and the three small drops of sweat above her lip. One of the works is a chalk drawing, and visitors are invited to rub parts of it out. ‘Ah, wipe out AIDS, very good,’ said the princess with her husky voice, and she nodded with satisfaction.

I see the children who took part in the workshop we held in a large shopping centre. One of the Thai artists had made a stamp, which was used to make prints that were given to the children to colour in. I watched as one mother picked up an ArtAids brochure. I see a large golden Buddha with an enormous red AIDS ribbon, the work of Leo Copers that is being exhibited at Silpakorn University. Until three minutes before the opening yesterday Leo was still arranging and rearranging the ribbon.

There was also music at the opening of our exhibition at the Tadu Art Gallery, as well as dancing and delicious snacks (when Thai get together there’s always food). I see the buttons in the shape of eyes that Kamol Phaosavasdi made, one for positive and one for negative. And I see the thirteen framed forms, the work of the young artist Patiroop Chychookiat. He asked his fellow artists and the ArtAids team to take an HIF test. Twelve negative results are now hanging in the exhibition room, and one positive: mine.

I see the faces of the children with HIV who were photographed by Manit Sriwanichpoom. The Thai authorities didn’t allow us to show the photographs at Silpakorn University because the children were recognizable, and that could lead to social exclusion – even though the subtitle of the exhibition is ‘A contemporary art event to fight the stigma of HIV’. So we organized a separate exhibition in the photographer’s gallery called *Life is Beautiful*.

Slowly all these images begin to merge. The colours and the shapes become one with the other ideas in my mind, and then they fade. Not only do my thoughts seem to be dissolving, but I, too, am being swallowed up in the whole. My self is disappearing and there no longer a border between me and the music, between me and the constantly changing images on the wall, between me and the all the others who are here. I don’t know if it’s the high I’m feeling from the past few days, from the beers I’ve had, the heat, the pounding of the

music or the dancing bodies right next to me, but I feel terrific. Being one with the people around me – there's no more perfect happiness imaginable, even if it only lasts as long as a number by Lady Gaga.

## **Augustus 2008 – Exposed**

Some people ask me why I do it. I shrug my shoulders and peel off a couple of practical reasons, but actually I don't really know. I just do it, without thinking about it. It's intuitive.

But today I suddenly know. I know why I feel the need to show other people the things that I think are beautiful: it's a form of exhibitionism. I like to be naked, and (this just makes it worse) I like to be naked with somebody else's body. I'm a cowardly flasher.

It seems prudent and safe, but that's deceptive. There is no safe exhibitionism. You're naked, even if the body is borrowed. You expose yourself to criticism.

I know that there might be nasty reactions, that what appeals to one person may leave another person cold. It's an occupational hazard. 'If you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen' is what the Americans say, whose practical streak is evident in so many of their adages. I love to cook, but I have no interest in burning my fingers. I want to have my cake and eat it too.

I know the rules of the game, yet each time someone doesn't share my enthusiasm it hurts my feelings. Recently I read an article about an exhibition that appeared in an evening newspaper in which the reviewer had made a few critical remarks. 'That man doesn't know what he's writing about!' I shouted angrily as I tore the paper into a hundred pieces and tried to flush them down the toilet. The shreds of paper just kept on swirling, around and around. Even the john doesn't like this shit.

It's painful to be naked. It's risky. You feel the cold on all sides. And yet I flatly refuse to protect myself, to cover myself up. I can't help

it. And I'm going to do it all over again: buy another beautiful piece to hang on the wall of a museum in the hope that as many people as possible will see it.

## July 2009 – No estas solo

'Take the hand of the person next to you and hold it tight.' The words echo throughout the Fundació Joan Miró museum. Markus, one of the co-workers with Pipilotti Rist, sets an example by grabbing the hand of the woman next to him and nods encouragingly to the gallery full of Catalan authorities and people from the Barcelona art world. He's here on behalf of Pipilotti (who couldn't be here herself because of the pneumonia she contracted in Vietnam) to accept the Joan Miró prize that she's been awarded.

'Go on,' says Markus. The people look at one another somewhat awkwardly. They're not accustomed to grabbing the hands of strangers. After all the official speeches in which the importance of art in general, the importance of art in Catalonia in particular and the importance of lots of other things is solemnly acknowledged, this is an unexpected request. But Markus repeats it. The man on my right searches in vain for my hand and finally takes hold of the empty sleeve of my jacket.

So there we are, hand in hand: the jury members for the Joan Miró prize, the director of the Fundació Miró and her closest colleagues, the various dignitaries in their dark suits, the art critics, the Catalan artists, the journalists and all others present.

'Raise your hands in the air and repeat what I say,' Markus cries. '*No estas solo*' – you are not alone.

'*No estas solo*,' responds the crowd softly, almost inaudibly. '*No estas solo*.' Louder now. Then finally, '*No estas solo!*' resounds throughout the gallery.

It gives me goose bumps. *No estas solo*. These three words explain what art is and why art is. They say why we live and how we ought to live. These three words reflect the essence of my existence. This is what I aim for with my writing, with the way I collect, with my art projects, with my friendships and my loves.

*No estas solo.* The words are still resounding in my head later on as I stand on the patio of the Fundació Miró, holding a glass of cava. *No estar solo.* That's what I want.

## September 2009 – Finger on her Cheek

Walking through Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen on my way to the opening of *The Art of Fashion: Installing Allusions*, the exhibition on the interface of fashion and art that José Teunissen and I first envisioned two years ago, I see it immediately: the painting I used to visit with frequent regularity when I was a boy of ten.

I often came here on Wednesday afternoon, when I had no school. I did want to play outside with the other children, but something kept holding me back. I preferred to take the tram to the city – line 4 – and get out at the Heemraadssingel, then walk to the museum.

There was a solemn, mysterious smell in the entrance hall, something like in church but sweeter, more chic. It was enough just to walk through the galleries, to soak in the restfulness and silence. I felt respect for the paintings hanging there.

My favourite place was one of the bay windows. I would install myself there so I could look at a painting of a woman with big dark eyes. She had black hair and wore a flowered shawl. On the table in front of her lay a closed fan. The woman was holding the index finger of her right hand against her cheek. She was a Spanish dancer, I was sure of it, and she was taking a bit of a rest in a café in Paris after a performance. What a Spanish dancer was doing in Paris was a question I couldn't answer (I had never been to Paris), but there was no doubt in my mind that this was Paris.

I imagined artists sitting in the café drinking wine, in the middle of the day, and French ladies with low-cut décolletés, like the ones I had seen at home in a book with posters from that time. The dancer looked around, amused by the people she saw. Everyone was deep in conversation, but not with her. She didn't care, though. Looking was enough. Later she would open her fan and fan herself in such a



way that the men would wonder what she meant. Were the movements of her wrist secret codes that she used to send a message?

I loved hidden codes, gestures that only insiders could understand. I myself had a whole series of them. If I scratched my ear it meant, 'Look at that man there'. If I ran my arm along my cheek, that meant, 'I'm tired'. If I half-closed my eyes, it meant, 'Let's go outside'. But I had no insiders to share my gestures with. My brothers and sister were too young, and the boys in my class were too rough.

As I sat in the bay window I could hear the creaking of the parquet and whispering voices in the distance. The sun shone through the net curtains onto the velvet upholstery. I stood up to look at the sign that hung next to the painting and saw to my surprise that it didn't say 'Spanish dancer' but 'Finger on her cheek / Le doigt sur la joue'. The work was painted in around 1910 and donated to the museum by a certain Mrs L. de Graaff-Bachiene.

Would it have hung above the fireplace in this lady's house, in a living room that she called the 'salon'? Would she have sat in a chair every day looking at the Spanish dancer? Would she have spoken to her? Told her about Mr de Graaff and his bad temper, about the gardenias in her garden? Would she know what part of Spain the dancer came from, whether she was married, and if she was, whether her husband was also in Paris?

In the museum shop I bought a postcard of the painting with my pocket money. I hung it opposite my bed so I could look at it every evening. Maybe the dancer would also tell me where she came from, where her husband was and what the motion of her fan meant.

I say good-bye to my Spanish dancer. The opening of *The Art of Fashion* will start in a few minutes, and there are dresses being shown in that exhibition that wouldn't have looked bad on her.

## November 2009 – Sanatorio de los Cocos

'I'm going to get the cactus from the De los Cocos sanatorium in Cuba and bring it here,' said Núria Güell, a slender artist with curly hair.

To prepare for the ArtAids exhibition in Barcelona, the curator and I spoke with the artists who were going to make works inspired by the stigma of HIV.

One by one, the artists told us their ideas for the project. A computer installation with an ethnographic map of HIV, a sculpture of the face of Chris Smith – the first British politician to go public with the fact that he was HIV positive – and a photo and video report of a journey from an HIV laboratory here in Barcelona to the polio vaccine laboratory in Congo where some say the first case of HIV was diagnosed.

Other artists proposed taking a picture of a cloth in the wind, a blackboard on which people could write their thoughts about HIV, a film about HIV-positive women in Morocco, and a red ribbon pasted to the wall and made of newspaper clippings about HIV from the previous year. And then there was Núria's cactus.

Núria Güell has lived in Cuba for a while and goes regularly to the Sanatorio de los Cocos, a hospital where people with HIV are required to be admitted. The compulsory admission strikes me as the most effective way of making sure that no one is tested voluntarily. People who might be infected now pass the virus on to others without knowing they have it.

Until a few years ago, Cubans with HIV had to spend the rest of their lives in the hospital. Now they're allowed to leave three months after their test results. 'But most of those who are HIV positive choose to stay. They *can't* go back home,' Núria explains as she twists a curl around her finger.

In the garden of the sanatorium there was a cactus on which the residents carved out their names or the date they were admitted. It's a heartbreaking variation on the names that lovers scratch into the bark of trees, in the hope that they'll always be attached, even when the love, or the lives of the lovers, is long past.

Núria also said she wanted to make a series of photographs of the HIV-positive Cubans as they did their carving in the cactus. We'd only see the hands. The people want to remain anonymous, just as they do in far-off Spain.

One year later the cactus is standing in the Santa Monica art centre on the Ramblas. It's grown enormously since arriving in Barcelona. The curator and the artist had a long discussion about whether you could shorten a work of art, and if so, how. But the cactus keeled over, so there was no choice.

On this cold November evening I see it for the first time. It's standing in the corner of the hall, about two metres high. Dandy, Manolito, Juan, Beatriz – some names are formed by big, fat letters, others are barely legible.

I try to imagine the sanatorium: a low, white building from the sixties with a tropical garden, as the name 'los Cocos' suggests, full of palm trees. There, in that garden, is a man patiently jabbing at a cactus with a toothpick. At first I can't read his name. Then I see an H and an A.

If I had been born in Cuba I would have been isolated, locked up and excluded, and if I had tried to go home I would have found myself face to face with a locked door. Then I, too, would have carved my name in a blade of the cactus.

But am I not doing exactly what the HIV-positive Cuban are doing?

I carve my words into books and short sketches, I make an invisible scratch on the works of art that I buy or commission. I carve my connection into the art project. With barely legible letters I write my name on the presentation of ArtAids here in Barcelona.

That's how I let people know I'm here.

Just like my colleagues in Cuba, I hope that part of me will go on living.

## December 2009 – Full circle

It's busy today in the public library of La Mina, a deprived district of Barcelona. A major ArtAids events is about to take place here. During the workshops we held in recent weeks, we had a big book in which we invited local residents – both young and old – to draw, paint or paste something that is somehow related to HIV. Today, World AIDS Day, the book will be unveiled in the library.

I see lanky boys of about thirteen, ex-drug addicts, groups of housewives, grandmas and, here and there, a few men of about thirty. The alderman for this part of the city is here, too.

Someone who isn't here is Pipilotti Rist. I spoke to her earlier today and she said she'd try to make it. If she doesn't I perfectly understand: she didn't arrive in the city until this morning. There were a series of interviews scheduled for her today plus a discussion with the people at the Fundació Joan Miró, where an exhibition of her work will be held next year. It's not easy to get to La Mina, either. Not all the taxi drivers are willing to come to this neighbourhood, which is mainly inhabited by gypsies. The fact that Pipilotti said she wanted to come was in itself a very sympathetic gesture.

A group of young people are performing a play about a girl who says 'no' when her boyfriend doesn't want to use a condom. The thirteen-year-old boys in the audience are sitting on the edge of their seats. They're shouting the loudest. The grandmothers are clapping their hands. The play is ten times longer than the scene would take in real life. Then there's time for speeches: by the alderman, by a boy of about sixteen, by a mother who lost a son to AIDS. When it's my turn I talk about how happy I am that we're all here together and that we can share our feelings. One of the women gives me a big kiss. I blush.

Then we go to the great hall, where drawings by young people are on display. Coming down the stairs, I suddenly see her standing

there in her orange quilted jacket and yellow sneakers: Pipilotti! She's still carrying her travel bag.

A little while later we're bending over a sheet of paper on which a naked man and women are painted in bold purple and green brush strokes. Suddenly I don't know what to say. Ten years ago, her exhibition *Remake of the Weekend* inspired me to begin playing an active role in the art world, and now Pipilotti is holding up a work that emerged from something I said. We've come full circle, I realize, but we're not done yet.

## January 2010 – The Art of Fashion

‘Could you look into the camera, please, and turn a little towards me?’ The photographer gestures with his hand. I’ve just been interviewed by a journalist from *Het Financieele Dagblad*, and now the newspaper photographer wants to take a picture of me here in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen next to one of the works from the exhibition I’m partly responsible for organizing. We’re right on time: it’s the last day of *The Art of Fashion*, and in ten minutes the gallery is closing.

The photographer has chosen the work of Viktor & Rolf: a shop window dummy who carries a frame construction bearing lamps and speakers from which music is issuing. The dummy is wearing a grey dress, part of which is held up by the frame. Tied around her waist is a red-and-white silk ribbon, the end of which is fastened to one of the lamps. On her feet are high-heeled wooden clogs.

I remember exactly when José Teunissen and I saw the frame for the first time. On that occasion it was worn by a live model. It was in 2007 at a Viktor & Rolf fashion show in Paris. H+F Fashion on the Edge had funded this walking installation, since this is exactly the kind of work I’m interested in: it’s a concept that explores the area between fashion and art. It’s an idea – the dress as total fashion show – that is expressed in terms of form, and in that form it simultaneously constitutes a commentary on the shows and everything that happens around them.

As the mannequin staggered down the Paris planking in her wooden clogs, I whispered to José: ‘We’ve got to make an exhibition out of this. I want to see what’s hidden in the heads of the designers – their fantasies and dreams, and maybe even their nightmares.’

‘So let’s do it,’ whispered José back. That reassured me. Because when José says she’s going to do something, you can be sure it’s really going to happen.

The photographer takes a few steps to the side. I button my jacket and look into the camera, but once again my thoughts start to drift. I’m thinking about that time we agreed to meet in the London area of Shoreditch at the favourite restaurant of designer Hussein Chalayan: José, three of the artists we had invited for our exhibition-in-progress, and myself. José and I had already spoken with all the designers separately about their proposals. Anna-Nicole Ziesche had talked about her childhood bedroom in her parents’ house which was practically unchanged, and about the sweater she wore when she was fourteen. She wanted to bring those two elements together. Naomi Filmer wanted to concentrate her designing energies on the invisible spaces where women usually don’t wear jewellery: a knee, an elbow. Hussein Chalayan was looking for a way to demonstrate the elements and the passing of time. He talked about a terrarium, about the roots of trees and about video installations.

In the restaurant the designers told each other about their work. They asked José and me questions about the available exhibition space, about the material they might use, the size of the work, what the background ought to consist of and how the area would have to be lit. As we talked, the things that seemed vague at first became more and more definite. I enjoyed being part of this, hearing the designers talk, hearing José’s suggestions, seeing the works being born. This encounter was infinitely more fun than buying a ready-made work. Planning something with others and sending it out into the world: in the end that’s what gives me the greatest satisfaction.

A group of young girls in brightly coloured jackets is standing around a vest made of broken dishes by Maison Martin Margiela. An elderly couple is looking at the fabric body parts by Helen Chadwick, the woman pointing to a pink armpit, one of Chadwick’s three ‘Body Cushions’.

The photographer asks if I might turn a bit more and smile. No trouble complying with the last request. Standing here among the news works we commissioned and the existing works we chose to add to them, I can only be satisfied. It's not just because of the results. I'm also happy when I think about the contact I've had with the artists. Walter Van Beirendonck took José and me to a macrobiotic restaurant in Antwerp. He stroked his beard with his heavily ringed fingers and took a bite of his bean casserole while fantasizing aloud about how the 'sarcophagus' he was making would be found in the year 2357. In Amsterdam, Viktor & Rolf were concerned about whether they would come up with the right fragrance for their 'Alternative No. 1' installation: it couldn't be too pleasing, nor could it be so nasty that it would make people feel sick. They had already made dozens of attempts. Just before the opening I saw Hussein Chalayan cutting the hair of the shop window dummy that was part of his 'Micro Geography' installation.

Once again I'm seeing what the designers have invested in their works, and that's a lot more than just time and energy: they've tried to show something of themselves to the world, and to do it in their own way. They're telling stories with their work, stories with which the visitor can identify.

'Mouth closed for this smile. A bit more restrained, please.'

It's past five, and except for the photographer and me the gallery is empty. Then the photographer is finished and he leaves, too. I make one last round past the 'Soundsuits' that Nick Cave made from recycled materials, past the Louise Bourgeois's pink doll, past Dirk Van Saene's paper dresses and Dai Rees's eight leather carcass-like sculptures. I pause for a moment and try to take it all in. More than two and a half years ago none of this was here, and we – José, the designers and the artists, the museum staff and I – created a world out of that nothing.

A world that grew out of ideas and fantasies, that emerged with the help of dedication and energy. And we've been able to share that world with thousands of people.

'Closing time!' shouts the attendant, but I don't want to leave. I want to hold onto this world just a little longer. I take a deep breath and smell leather and fabric and polishing wax. I'm afraid that this is going to be just like all those other moments that I told myself I mustn't forget, that I had to engrave in my memory. Later on the only thing I could remember was how hard I tried concentrate, but not the moment itself. So I try to relax.

I look around one last time. Then the attendant turns off the light and closes the door behind me.

## February 2010 – Paintings II

It's now almost seven years since I saw the photographs at Art Brussels, but I still occasionally think about the series by Paul Graham called 'Paintings', photographs I did not buy.

I take from my bookshelf the pink linen booklet that the gallery owner gave me at the time. I still find the works compelling. The turquoise wall with a sticker and lines tracing the outline of a woman with big breasts, the pink tiles on which something not entirely legible is written in ballpoint, the grey wall that looks as if it's made of steel, full of scratches and smudges, the green wall bearing only obliterated words and a date: 11/03/99.

I should have bought them then. What nonsense that I had to have all fourteen; three or five would have been fine. They would have been perfect for the exhibition *The Suspended Moment*, beside the work by the photographer Naoya Hatakeyama and the painter Prudencio Irazabal.

Only now do I read the text printed on the first page of the booklet. It's the letter that Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Adolph Gottlieb sent to *The New York Times* in 1943 in which they set forth their artist beliefs. They wrote that art is an adventure in an unknown world that only can be discovered by those who dare to take that risk. This fantasy world is free, and it's the exact opposite of common sense. It is the role of the artist to show the viewer *his* world, not the world of the viewer himself.

'We favour the simple expression of the complex thought. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess a spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art. Consequently, if our work embodies these beliefs it must insult anyone who is spiritually attuned to interior

decoration; pictures for over the mantel; prize-winning potboilers; etc.'

The letter imparts an extra dimension to Graham's work. The simple expression of a complex thought, primitive art – this is indeed what is suggested by the photos of the walls of public toilets with drawings of widespread legs, sex organs and women's wide open mouths. They certainly aren't made to hang over the mantel.

Paul Graham knew what he was doing. I didn't, seven years ago at that fair in Brussels. Since then he's done more interesting work. He is an artist worth following. But I'm too late. The moment has passed. His prices have risen and it does no good to return to the past. I've got to go forward. I've got to discover a new Paul Graham.

## May 2010 – Notion Motion

Five years ago I gave the installation 'Notion Motion' by Olafur Eliasson to Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. Now that it's being shown again in the museum I've been asked to say something.

I'm standing at a microphone in the courtyard of the museum on a sunny Saturday, waiting for the signal to begin. Suddenly the past five years flash before my eyes. They say that when you're dying you see your whole life pass before you in half a second, but I'm still quite alive.

I get to the moment when I first saw 'Notion Motion'. Using simple components – wooden planking, a sponge, spotlights and three enormous water basins – Eliasson has made a monumental work that covers fifteen hundred square meters. It's the power of the work's simplicity that so appeals to me. When you stand on the planking the water moves, which makes the light move, which makes the whole installation move. A work that involves the visitor to this extent, that's simple, minimal and at the same time overwhelming – that is the art I want to be connected with.

When the museum and I began our five-year joint venture in November 2005, the idea was that we would purchase work by a number of selected artists via H+F Mecenaat, and each year we would hold 'interventions' in the museum. I knew immediately that 'Notion Motion' should be part of this project. This was just what we had in mind with our patronage venture. I bought the work and presented it to the museum, under the condition that it would be shown once every five years – naturally in consultation with Sjarel Ex, the director.

In the five years that the Mecenaat has existed we have supported several artists, among them David Claerbout, Ryan Gander, Sylvie Zijlmans, Olaf Nicolai and Shirana Shahbazi. We commissioned Andro Wekua to make the installation 'Wait to Wait'. In this work, a

boyish figure rocks back and forth in a rocking chair, hidden behind the coloured glass of a large display case. Pipilotti Rist created the video installation 'Let Your Hair Down' especially for the museum stairwell. And we had the ephemeral 'interventions' by Steiner & Lenzlinger, which ended after less than a year, leaving only the photographs. This transience suited me to a T, which probably makes me quite different from many other collectors. For me it's not necessary to have anything tangible. 'Having' is an illusion, and I can evoke the memory of it any time.

As I stand waiting in the courtyard of the museum I see all these works before me. It's a kaleidoscope running in fast forward. Then I get the sign. I tap the microphone a few times and begin to speak. 'You know a work of art is really good if it moves you the second time you see it just as much as it did the first time. Just as much, or perhaps even more.'

I think again of my first encounter with 'Notion Motion' and I get goose bumps, despite the sun. You can be moved if you just *think* about a work of art. You don't even have to see it. There's no doubt about it – for me, 'Notion Motion' is Notion Emotion.

I pause to cough and continue speaking.

## May 2010 – Midwife

Today it arrived, in a gleaming envelope: the VIP card for Art Basel. It's done up in Chanel grey, a colour that suits the dark outfits worn by every self-respecting art fair attendee.

It's not without pride that I've shown my VIP card at the entrance every year. It shows that I'm not one of the ordinary visitors who had to stand in line for hours for an admission ticket. I was special. I belonged. I really, really belonged, is what the card said.

Last year it was canary yellow. The sturdy Swiss lady in her train conductor's uniform nodded. I could pass. I had come to know the fair layout by heart, and I knew that you first had to go from upstairs to downstairs and then from left to right. I would never get lost again, as I did during my first visits.

But I surprised myself to discover that, unlike those previous years, I wasn't all wound up. On the contrary, it irritated me to see the work of Gerhard Richter being shown next to that of Tracy Emin and Rineke Dijkstra. It disturbed me that works of art were hanging like sausages at the butcher's, like skinned rabbits at the poulterer's.

The year before that I was still walking around in a trance. I saw the black men by Zwelethu Mthethwa, their faces gleaming with beaded sweat. 'Flex' was the name of the video, and I wondered whether it had been recorded in a fitness centre or a bedroom. I wanted the video, I could feel it in my gut, the way I always do when I know what I want almost without thinking about it.

After the purchase, which took five minutes to arrange, I went to the VIP lounge. Not because I wanted to rest on the soft white sofas – I hadn't had my fill by a long shot – but to look at my fellow VIPs: the American lady in the black pants suit with her glittering rings, the

girl with long, straight hair who was fanning herself with the Andreas Gursky brochure (I had just seen a work by Andreas Gursky that cost 1.3 million euros at the White Cube Gallery). The man in the dark blue suit, slightly too tight, who was taking bites out of his ice cream, so that his vanilla moustache stood out against his St. Tropez tan. And the bald, middle-aged man with a double chin who was startled to see himself in the mirror.

I didn't stay long in the VIP lounge. I had to return to the hunt. There was still so much waiting for me.

Last year it was suddenly different. I was no longer excited by looking at so much art. It disturbed me to see how coarsely they were being presented, how naked they were. The crowded stands with their neon lights didn't do them the least bit of justice. It wasn't about art. It was about consumerism. Art Basel is a brothel, I felt. The most expensive brothel in the world, where I, with my VIP card, get first pick.

I think about the conversations I had about a year and half ago with Hussein Chalayan and the other designers I had commissioned to make works for the exhibition *The Art of Fashion*. Hussein was wondering aloud about how he could express his ideas. 'What do you think of this?' he asked during a lunch. 'A tree, a shop window dummy, television cameras in a terrarium and then screens on the outside. Would that work?' I was so surprised and honoured that he wanted to hear my opinion that I didn't know what to say.

During the next visit, about three months later, I knew. A tree in the terrarium would work as long as you could see the roots and the shop window dummy was sticking out of the top.

One year later, what had been only an idea during our first conversation was on display in the Boden Gallery at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, next to the works by Walter Van Beirendonck, Viktor &



Rolf, Anna-Nicole Ziesche and Naomi Filmer, which I had seen being born over the previous year and a half.

I'm not a whorehouse john any more. I'm a midwife, and midwives have no business at Art Basel.

I look at the gleaming card once again that opens so many doors – doors I no longer want to go through. I throw the whole package in the wastebasket.

## July 2010 – Walter Benjamin

'Do you think Walter Benjamin was right when he said that collecting is a way to stand up to death because a collection is never finished?'

The Spanish journalist pushes her large black glasses up her nose for the umpteenth time.

Good gracious, Walter Benjamin. What am I to make of this? I have a bit of difficulty with some theories because I'm convinced that reason follows action – even though we usually think it's the other way around. But even so: do I collect as a way to stand up to death?

I collect because I'm touched by good art and I want to share that emotion with others. It's like when you have a book that touches you, so you lend it to friends or give it to them as gifts. You don't do it because you want to get into a deep discussion with them about the book. You do it because it makes you feel good if they experience what you've experienced, even if you never talk about it.

Standing up to death? Isn't everything we do in defiance of death? You bake a cake, you mow the lawn, you write a book, you have a baby because you want life to go on.

Except for Shakespeare, Beethoven and a few other people, immortality is an illusion. In a hundred years no one will remember me. They may read on a little sign that 'Notion Motion' is a gift of the H+F Mecenaat, but that won't mean anything to anybody – unlike the work itself. And that's fine. I'm a thousand times more interested in what happens before my death than in what happens afterward.

The journalist sighs slightly, jots something down and pushes her glasses up again.

And then I say, 'I collect because it gives me pleasure, especially

if other people are also able to enjoy my collection. Is that a way of standing up to death?’

## July 2010 – Witness

Hanging in the dark space is a lamp with little holes in it, like one of those lamps that project dancing bears and sailboats on the walls of children’s bedrooms. What artist Mona Hatoum is showing on the walls of the Beirut Art Center isn’t little bears, however, but soldiers with their rifles at the ready. They’re standing right outside the museum, too – in stiff green suits, their red berets tipped at an angle on their heads. Walls of sandbags have been stacked up beside them, and in front is a big green tank on which the whole street converges. The last war took place four years ago.

Hanging in the middle of the exhibition space is a glittering curtain. Only when I get closer to it can I see that it’s made of barbed wire – the barbed wire you still see in roadblocks and on walls.

Also in the Beirut Art Center are two swings, the seats of which appear to be glass maps of the city. There’s a kitchen with a wooden table that has one drawer open. Have the inhabitants stepped out for a moment? Have they gone to the bakery, perhaps? Or did they scramble out head over heels, fleeing from menacing danger? Is the open drawer waiting for their return, in vain?

Whenever I see a work by Mona Hatoum I want to cry out, ‘Where is everybody?’

I’ve spent days in the city itself looking for a place where people congregate, a centre, a heart. There’s Solidere, an exact copy of the city centre as it used to look before it was destroyed during the civil war that raged from 1975 to 1990. It’s been rebuilt with Saudi money and it looks like a substitute for the real thing. That alienation is reinforced by the fact that the buildings are mostly empty. Only the ground floor is in use as a luxury shop or restaurant. You can go to Gucci, Armani and Dior, but there’s no tobacco shop, bakery or greengrocer’s to be seen.

Downtown Beirut is a full-scale Madurodam. Tourists from the Gulf states wander through it with their Sri Lankan and Filipino domestics. But I can't find the heart of Lebanon anywhere.

I search further in other neighbourhoods. I come to Gemmayzeh, where art deco houses with bullet holes stand beside luxury apartments with marble balconies. An old gentleman shuffles down the street and gives me a friendly greeting in French.

With some buildings it's hard to tell whether they've been shot to bits or they're under construction. Maybe the construction stopped halfway. Did they run out of money? Or did the people leave the country?

In the well-to-do neighbourhood of Ashrafieh, a servant carries the garbage downstairs and a blond woman in tight jeans steps out of a Porsche. She's gazed at by Syrian construction workers who are building a luxury apartment across the street.

And everywhere I go, I wonder: where is everybody? Was this place full of life once, and did the war put an end to it all? But if Lebanon is a phoenix that keeps rising from its ashes – as the hundreds of building cranes in the city loudly insist – why isn't there a new heart? Is everyone staying in their own neighbourhood, afraid of everyone else? But then there ought to be a street crawling with Maronites, another with Shiites, another with Sunnis, a street with Druze and a street with Armenians? In the Armenian part of the city, however, I see concrete buildings but few people on the street.

I'm surprised by the absence of people in Beirut, once called the 'Paris of the East'. As in earlier years, when I was a boy of fourteen, a feeling creeps over me that life is taking place somewhere else and that I'm missing out on it because I'm in the wrong place. I feel the anxiety of being alone in the bedroom with the frightening images on the wall, in the labyrinth of barbed wire, on the glass swing, alone in the abandoned house.

The emptiness I see in the work of Mona Hatoum isn't just that of the centre of Beirut. It's my own emptiness, too. With her distortion of reality, Hatoum gives me a better look at Beirut, but she also exposes my own fears and longings. It's not for nothing that the exhibition is called *Witness*.

Back in Barcelona I can't stop talking about the work I saw in Beirut. It's the first thing I tell the director of the Fundació Joan Miró at the opening of the exhibition by Pipilotti Rist. Rosa Maria starts to laugh and tells me that Mona Hatoum will be the winner of the next Miró prize. 'It's not official yet,' she whispers to me.

But I already know. In two years a work made especially for the Fundació Miró by Mona Hatoum will be shown here. I'll take care of it.

## September 2010 – Kitchen wall

I've just returned from a meeting with the coordinator of ArtAids, and there it is in the stack of mail on the cabinet in the hall: the announcement of a presentation of *Fashion on the Edge* in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. It's a card featuring a picture of one of the works: a doll wrapped up in a blanket and lying on a table. Peeking out from beneath the blanket is a tutu, and legs wrapped in white fabric. It's neither human nor animal, this creation by Alet Pilon. It's a creature that exists in the twilight region between life and death. Her little red shoes don't strike you as cheerful but as insubstantial, threatening.

I tape the card on the kitchen wall, next to all the other announcements of exhibitions I've been involved in. Every day I look at them: when I eat breakfast, at lunchtime and during our evening meal. Most of my collection is out on loan at various museums, and these announcements and the catalogues are the only tangible things that I have. That and the images that come to mind when I think about the exhibitions.

The skyline of the North Korean capital of Pyongyang – a photograph by Martine Stig – is the announcement of *Whisper not!* in Huis Marseille. Director Els Barents and I put this exhibition together from photographs that were already part of my collection and new works that I had acquired. Among those we selected were the photographs by Luisa Lambri of open windows in the house of the Mexican architect Luis Barragán, the becalmed cityscapes by Frank van der Salm, the insubstantial landscapes by Jörg Sasse and the 'Ophelia' with long hair by the Spanish Carmela García. Seldom did Els and I disagree, and after looking, talking and choosing, we arrived at the restrained yet powerful entity that became *Whisper Not!*

Next to that is the announcement of *Living Art* (2004), an exhibition in Thailand on HIV and AIDS. It was my first contact

with Thai artists. Many of them made an impression on me, but I was mainly touched by a video by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook in which three children infected by HIV, all of them from a village in north Thailand, sing the Thai national anthem. Their parents had died of AIDS and now they were living with their grandparents. No one was allowed to know that they were HIV positive, and they received no medical support. I stood for hours in the dark room where the film had been projected on the ground. I now know the Thai national anthem almost by heart.

At the very top of the kitchen wall is a photo of the sculpture 'Apollo' that Olaf Nicolai made for the courtyard of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, commissioned by H+F Mecenaat. It's a round, half-open construction made of reflective material, and in Rotterdam it's now known as the 'football cage'. Anyone who visits the museum can kick a ball around, and the movements of the players are reflected by the mirrors, which produces a stroboscopic effect. At the opening event I was allowed to show off my football skills, which were just as lousy as they were forty-five years ago.

The red Venetian blinds by the Swedish photographer Annika von Hausswolff are featured on the announcement of the first exhibition of my collection in Spain, *Las partes y el todo*. It was an unprecedented luxury to have part of my collection within walking distance. Each week there was a tour at which I could talk about 'my' works. Every time I explained why the savage waves by the Japanese monk and photographer Syoin Kajii appealed to me, I seemed to see the photos even better, the reflection of light on the water in one photo, the foam from the sea on the other.

Just beneath the red Venetian blinds by Von Hausswolff is the announcement of the Rob Nypels exhibition. Els Barents of Huis Marseille brought me in contact with the work of this photographer, which had rarely been shown before. Undeservedly, I thought. I was immediately and deeply impressed by the way Nypels manages to

abstract trees, flowers, plants and animals into dark shadows and surfaces, the way he paints with his camera. I offered to finance a catalogue of his work.

A little further on are photos of the dolls that fashion designers Viktor & Rolf had made for their doll hours, which they showed in London and Utrecht. The dolls wear miniatures of three dresses that I had purchased earlier. In Paris I had seen how one of these dresses was made. I saw separate pieces – a skirt here, a voile there, the seamstresses bending way over the fabric. Only during the fashion show did I see the magnificent result: a silver-plated corset that recalls baby shoes that are dipped in silver to preserve a precious moment.

The face of a Thai boy smiles at me from his place right next to the kitchen cabinet. It's one of the photos that the artist Mani Sriwanichpoom made for the exhibition *More to Love*, which ArtAids organized in Bangkok. The works in my collection are far away, but I can look at them every day: in the morning with the muesli, in the afternoon with the *arroz negro* and in the evening with the fish and vegetables. My kitchen wall is one big museum, a museum with the occasional grease spot.

## October 2010 – Villabona

It's raining softly when we arrive at the prison of Villabona in the north of Spain. ArtAids has organized a project here around a work of art consisting of a table with benches made of blackboard material. HIV positive prisoners are invited to write their thoughts on it. Workshops are being held, and the maker of the work, Jordi Canudas, has spent several weeks in this prison.

The prison is located in a low, hexagonal building with light yellow walls. It looks more like an enormous sports centre than a prison, were it not for the fact that there are barbed wire fences all around.

At the entrance our passports and mobile telephones are taken. It's as if we – Felipe, ArtAids coordinator Gerardo and I – had travelled to a country where contact with the outside world is not permitted. We're led into something like a rocket ship air lock, and a door with bars closes behind us with a bang. For a moment I'm overtaken by a sense of panic: I'm stuck. Then the next door opens and we enter a long corridor. It's cold; most of the public spaces in this prison are not heated.

On the grassy field between the buildings a man in a brown jacket is bending over a labrador. One of the staff members explains that the dogs are used as therapy for the prisoners. They're expected to care for the dogs and even teach them tricks. 'The man you see there was a member of ETA, the terrorist organization,' he says. I watch as the man in the brown jacket strokes the dog tenderly.

On the way we pass a boy pushing a laundry basket on wheels. He greets us. Does he work here? Is he serving time? He's not wearing a uniform. If he's a prisoner, it's the first one I've been so close to in my life.

Then we come to a recreation room where dozens of men dressed in

jeans, sweatshirts and thick sweaters wave to us from behind a fence. One of them touches my shoulder for a moment as I walk past. He calls me by name.

The prisoners here are going to perform a play for us that they've written themselves. It's about a drug addict tottering on the edge of death. Standing before a judge, who must decide whether he is to live or die, are the addict's organs, and they tell their story. A fat man wrapped in red satin is the heart. The walking brown lungs cough, the liver groans, the wrinkled brains have lost their way and a girl dressed in white is the soul: she is the only thing that's pure.

One of the prisoners whispers to me that they made the costumes themselves. I compliment him.

Life is chance. If I had been born somewhere else, in a less privileged situation, if things had happened differently, then perhaps I, too, would be walking around this stage like a mistreated liver in a badly fitting dark brown costume.

After the curtain has fallen and I've congratulated the actors, we go to the place where the works of art are located. 'This was the worst thing that's ever happened to me, but at the same time it's made me strong,' someone has written on the table top. 'Over and over again I keep on trying but I don't succeed.' 'Being able to talk to people who really listen to you, that's what I want.' 'Being vulnerable brings me closer to others.' The last one could have come straight out of my own diary.

We sit in a circle and the prisoners tell their stories, one by one. All the stories are unique, but they do resemble each other: wrecked families, a problem youth with drugs and crime, a history of prisons, the search to give meaning and structure to life. The detainees never get tired of talking. It's as if they hadn't been able to tell their stories in years. Their hearts are full, and this is their opportunity to lighten them.

What's touched them the most about the ArtAids project, they tell me, is that people from 'outside' are interested in their lives. They give me a present, which they've had ready for months: a glazed plate with a drawing of my head on it. I'm touched that they want to give me something, and at the same time I feel a bit embarrassed by what the present represents. I stand somewhat awkwardly with the plate in my hand and tell them what comes to mind. That despite our many differences – inside the prison walls or outside, HIV positive or not – we are connected to each other, we are part of the same family. We feel that connection most strongly when we share things with each other, as we've done today. I thank them and give each of them an *abrazo*, the Spanish embrace. A somewhat older man wraps his arms around me and holds me tight, as he wanted to hold something close to him from the outside and was unable to let go.

Before we leave, one of the guards and one proud prisoner show off the cells. All the doors are open between eight in the morning and eight in the evening, when no one is allowed to enter his cell. I can look in everywhere unapologetically. They're small compartments with a bunk bed and a minuscule room with a toilet, sink and shower. It smells stuffy. In one cell a T-shirt is hanging to dry in front of the window, in another there are photographs of smiling family members pasted on the wall. On one shelf there are some books, a bottle of shampoo and some deodorant.

How would I stand it here? Would I become numb or would I adjust? But how do you adjust to a life in which you're not even alone on the toilet?

Time must really pass slowly when so little happens besides the daily routine, so little that an ArtAids project is a major event and the head of a total stranger is glazed onto a plate.

Felipe and I make our way in silence to the restaurant where we're

going for lunch. As the sole à la meunière is being served my mind goes back to the prisoners we saw right before our departure, who were all lined up in front of the dining hall, aluminium plate and plastic cutlery in hand.

## **November 2010 – Dream**

The floor of Turbine Hall in London's Tate Modern seems to have been sown with what look like sunflower seeds but actually are a hundred million hand-painted pieces of porcelain. Each piece is unique.

I had read about this work by the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, and I had seen pictures of it on television. But nothing had prepared me for the overwhelming experience of so many elements that together form a unit, just as we are all part of a greater whole. It's an ingenious combination of unusual material, enormous effort, traditional skills and a hidden story: the association with the export of porcelain, once one of China's most important commodities.

I look at the work from the side. No one is allowed to walk across it because that would raise dust, which is bad for the health. But from this short distance the work is well within view. I can almost touch it.

It's a simple idea, this 'Sunflower Seeds'. A simple idea skilfully executed with the participation of hundreds of people, maybe thousands. That's exactly what I want to do with ArtAids. Wouldn't it be terrific if ArtAids were to invite Ai Weiwei to make a work? I'm sure he would come up with a striking image, an image that would also express his social involvement. And in China there's an enormous need to talk about HIV.

Shall I let one of Ai Weiwei's little stones slip into the pocket of my jacket? It's not allowed, but who's going to miss one stone when there are millions? It was allowed with Felix Gonzalez-Torres's mountains of hard candies.

I ought to find someone who knows Ai Weiwei. That's what we did when we wanted to ask the Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija to make a work for ArtAids. In the end, Hilde Teerlinck succeeded in meeting him, and soon we're going to visit him in Thailand.

I'd love to go to China to see Ai Weiwei.

I bend my knees and let my hand glide toward the porcelain sunflower seeds. With so many, no one's going to miss just a couple...

But how can I steal part of a work of art? How can I damage this sculpture? It would be vandalism – minor vandalism, but even so.

I rub my hand over my shoe and stand back up.

Wouldn't it be fantastic: a work like this, but meant to break through the stigma of AIDS, a work that encompasses the whole world, that would reach hundreds of thousands of people, millions? Who know, maybe Rirkrit knows Ai Weiwei, or maybe Rirkrit knows someone who knows Air Weiwei.

Riding back to my hotel in the taxi later on I feel a small, hard object in the pocket of my jacket. I didn't walk off with a porcelain seed in mid-fantasy, did I? It turns out to be a bit of old cookie for our dog Sarita. I sigh with relief, knowing that I'll still be able to look Ai Weiwei straight in the eye.

## December 2010 – Wishes

Some people know exactly where they want to be in five years. They say that kind of planning shows vision and decisiveness, so I'm going to do it, too, by God! I shut my eyes and try to imagine something that's not yet here.

But it doesn't work. I'm no longer used to living in the future. For twenty-three years, since I've known I was HIV positive, I've been aware that today is all I have – only 'now' is real. Bicycling and sex are two things you never forget how to do, but apparently thinking about the future is different.

So my fantasies no longer take place in the future. They're invented parallel lives – lives in which I write, have lunch with Felipe and take the dog for a walk. It's life as I live it but a bit more intense, without distractions, without interruptions and above all without the fatigue that is constantly getting in the way.

The first time I thought more than a few months ahead was when José Teunissen and I first talked about what *The Art of Fashion* was ultimately going to look like. It was 2007 and José suggested that the exhibition should take place in 2009. I thought I was being very bold to plan so far in the future. Wouldn't that be tempting fate?

But I still don't know where I'm going to be with my projects in five years' time. I have no clear vision. One project just emerges from another.

What I do have are a few wishes. The wish that I can keep on working this way – with artists, museum directors and curators, with the people around me. The wish that the projects will help artists go further, that museums will be given the chance to show something that otherwise would never have existed. The wish that the public will enjoy it as much as I do.



And then there's the wish that more people will become openly involved in art projects. Because the art world needs it, now more than ever in this time of cutbacks. And because I know how satisfying it is to work with other people in order to bring something about, something that has a place in the world, something that's meant to be seen.

If a wish is a vision of the future in the making, then I really am secretly thinking about tomorrow. If a wish is a vision of the future in the making, then I've shaken off an old habit without even knowing it.

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