

Q&A
Julia Geerlings

with
Lennart Lahuis

On the first day of April I am meeting with Lennart Lahuis for a coffee in Amsterdam at the Zuidas, the business district. Men and women in suits surround us, making us feel a bit out of place. We are meeting here because Lahuis has been commissioned to make a work for the art route 'Get Lost', during ArtZuid. The reason for our meeting is to talk about his upcoming exhibition 'Navigation' at Dürst Britt & Mayhew in The Hague. I have been following Lahuis' work since his residency at De Ateliers and currently we both live in Paris. It is about time to finally get together in order to learn more about the recent developments in his work.

Julia Geerlings: I am familiar with your work since your residency at De Ateliers, but I don't know much about the work you made before, for example at ArtEZ Institute of the Arts in Zwolle (2008–2011). Could you tell me a bit about the work you made there?

Lennart Lahuis: At the art academy I made paintings until my third year, after which I turned into a more sculptural direction. It all started when I began making walls for my paintings. I placed my paintings at an angle against the wall or placed a curved wall around a work. I got more interested in the wall or the support system itself and was inspired by artists like Haim Steinbach, who used structures and framing devices for his ready-mades or mass-produced objects. In my graduation exhibition I made varying two-dimensional surfaces (tapestry, painting, painted walls and photographs), but placed them throughout the space with thick frames or on elevated support systems like they were three-dimensional entities. I played with the mediation of perception by placing the works in such a way that the viewer was unable to see the whole image. The indirect access to visual information is still something that I am occupied with in my artistic practice.

JG: Where does this interest between the access to and the obstruction of (visual) information come from?

LL: I had a hard time finding a subject or theme to work with at the academy. I became more and more interested in the suspension of representation and the connection of artworks to their physical space. I guess that became my 'subject'. It was also the first time I used text in my work, but the text was used like an image. It was an image of an opened wad of paper and the text could not be read entirely. The text was about magic tricks referencing what you see and what you don't see or what to reveal or conceal. In the show at the gallery I will show images, which I found in picture frames bought online. The found images are pretty cheesy and cliché images of models, cityscapes, ethnic tribes and reproductions of famous artworks. I conceal these images by a glass plate, newspaper and beeswax. Only a vague silhouette of the image is left and the reference of the title. In general I like to work with materials that distance themselves from their specific qualities or

functionality. I used foil paper for 'Room2Rooms', which is basically a wrapping material. In the work it is not recognised as such and only serves to mystify the image. I was mostly interested in the reflection of light and of the visitors' mirror image in the shiny/metallic surfaces.

JG: It makes me think of the Russian theorist Ivan Chitchevlov who described the following psychological principle: when you enter a certain interior you do not directly notice the vase in the corner in a conscious way. If you enter the same room again and the vase has been removed, then the absence of the vase is a presence that you can feel. I feel a relational approach in your work with regards to human perception, in a way that the work is realised by the experience of the viewer.

LL: Yes, you could say that. I'm interested in artists like Dan Graham and other minimal artists, who examine the perception of the viewer in their work. In fact I get more and more interested in the relation between the physical space and the body as a continuously navigating entity. In the exhibition at Kunstraum in Düsseldorf last year I used text in a floor piece made out of mouthwash that slowly evaporated. I used texts from a medical dictionary that described physical sensations in a metaphorical way. I selected three pages in which the body as water, the body as empty (wind and air) and the body as grasping are being described. In the catalogue text for the exhibition I described a personal experience related to water and the body. One day I was in a quiet bar and I was pretty stoned. It was quite late and I was observing the bartender; she was washing the last empty glasses and she would take her wet hands from the sink to dry them with the towel thrown over her shoulder. In my mind she thought the towel was soaking wet, but then she realised it was her hands that were leaking. They simply wouldn't dry; they would stay wet, eternally dripping.

JG: Sounds like a good trip! That reminds me of the black towels with the chrome taps you were showing during the Offspring exhibition at De Ateliers. What interests you in these towels and 'ready-mades' in general?

LL: I was interested in the black towels because of their peculiarity. The three towels were shown as 'black' towels, but there were minimal differences in the black colours. Just like the mouthwash, which was shown in different colour variations. In 'Airspeakers' (the mouthwash containers) you can view the gradient of colour to no colour. The chrome taps were protruding from the black towels, reflecting the space and the light. In addition to these colour studies I was interested in objects that were specifically designed for the hand. At that time I also started reading the book 'On touching, Jean-Luc Nancy' by Jacques Derrida. Derrida conducts a profound review of the philosophy of the sense of touch throughout history by using the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy. Besides towels, taps and bags I was also fascinated for example by doorknobs, as a physical object for moving from one space to another. For me doorknobs, as well as scales or tape measures are navigation tools or anchoring points for navigating the exhibition space. They also serve as a contrast to my other works, in which I suspend visual information.

JG: That explains the title of your show. After De Ateliers you moved to Paris. How did the city influence your work?

LL: In Paris I came across the research of French social psychologist Serge Moscovici and his notion of 'social representation'. In his most famous study 'Psychoanalysis: Its image and Public' Moscovici analyses how the ideas of psychoanalysis entered French society in the fifties through mass culture (advertising, film, publication material). Because of reading this study I became interested in the picture frames and the mass-produced image. I find the democratization of imagery and the transmission of information into society fascinating. How do ideas find their way into society? What is the practical application of ideas? In my work I want to slow down the process of direct access to imagery and ideas. I want to hint at imagery and to appeal to the imagination of imagery instead of displaying images as such.