

Editing anxiety

An interview with Puck Verkade

By Zippora Elders

Puck Verkade explores societal phenomenons from personal and sometimes private perspectives. Her intimate stories are both reassuring and worrying. Her newest video work *Plague* reveals a great deal of care for the planet, yet maybe also a spooky inner world. At *Artissima* the video is accompanied by a series of watercolours and a large wall drawing.

Zippora Elders: Out of your watercolours you started making murals which seem to connect with your video works as some sort of storyboards. How are you working on these?

Puck Verkade: Making illustrations as a fragmented storyboard has been a fairly recent undertaking for me, as with all the other material-based aspects of this new video. It felt like I needed to confront my fear of making things with my hands. The illustrations most probably come from my lifelong obsession with cartoons and animations and the fact that they often have been used for criticism and reflection. I enjoy developing the characters like this so much, it feels like visually thinking out loud. Letting the drawings lead me to understand the characters and their story, instead of myself thinking out a concept beforehand.

ZE: That sounds like a big step. How did you proceed with making murals?

PV: It was you who asked me to enlarge the drawings into murals and I don't know if you remember but my first reaction was a firm no...

ZE: I do remember that. I thought it mostly came a bit unexpected for you, but I hoped the experimental and fairly 'safe' context could also push new things, no?

PV: I was afraid I wouldn't be able to work on a monumental scale and in a painterly context. Yet it's not in my nature to decline something when I'm scared – quite the opposite really. So the fact that it scared me so much actually convinced me to take it on anyways. To do this again for *Artissima* is uncomfortable because of the different setting, but I've come to realise that all my work originates from anxiety and unsettling feelings anyway, so why not just do it. But I'm not sure yet how I work on them; I improvise and channel through anxiety somehow, I guess.

ZE: What is it like for you to now work on the spot, 'edit' in real time, and also maybe 'perform' the drawing?

PV: I never thought I would commit to something so painterly. But when I look at the visual aspects and aesthetics of my current work I cannot deny it has gotten acquainted to the painterly domain. And let's not forget the realm of cartoons and animation. It's movement that still very much appeals to me. The movement of making murals on the spot has something that reminds me of editing and the movement of sequential images. I also have to think of the influence of animators Suzan Pitt and – mural – painter Antwan Horfee on my practice, both super strong in animation but much in a painter's spirit. Also you mention 'performing' and yes, performative aspects have crept into the forefront of my work so much! Playing and enacting all the characters in *Plague* was very transformative, and I think even the process of making the fly come alive through stop motion has a performative quality.

ZE: I believe you're quite specific about the presentation of your works. Your videos are often surrounded or carried by some sort of theatrical stage. How do you develop your installations?

PV: My priority lies with the video first, and then I start thinking what I could pull out and invite the viewer to empathise more with the narrative. For Plague's installation I wanted to emphasize the micro-macro conversion that plays an important part in the video. The 'chips' install mirrors quite a pivotal scene from the video, where Housewife is scaled down to the size of a pest and her existential anxiety seems to take over. Humor is a leading aspect in all my work. Yet to have viewers moving through a sculptural landscape of chips wasn't just slapstick fun, but also an invitation to contemplate our own – humankind's – position as a pest.

ZE: Your 'narratives' jump through time, thereby at the same time telling fragmented stories and weaving multiple storylines together, but simultaneously also dissecting the medium. When did you start working with moving image, and how did your approach evolve?

PV: I started using a simple camcorder when my mother died abruptly almost ten years ago. I think it was a psychological tool for me to record everything around me as a means to hold on to something in a long period of despair and grief. The notion of the camera as a mobile stage always stuck with me.

ZE: Did this fuel some kind of hyper-focus?

PV: I guess it became an obsession. From that I started to make very subjective documentaries where I would insert myself into shaky and unstable situations. For example an apocalyptic cult, a Dutch tv show, and a rebirth retreat, where I recorded and interviewed everything including myself. Having mastered the power of intervention and manipulation I felt that eventually it was somehow too exploitative for the subject as well as myself. This is how I slowly moved into using fiction, absurdity, and non-linearity; I started to bring in non-human 'actors' or narrators, and recycled repurposed images to further my practice.

ZE: And then, even further dissection?

PV: Through that transition I've become very critical of the persuasion of my own means and media. I wanted to uncover the power dynamics and biases that are part of recording and consuming images. So when I looked into the techniques of dialectical montage and non-linearity I understood suddenly that I could approach narrative in a distorted way. My approach in moving image and 'jumping through time', as you poetically put it... By the way, I like that description a lot because I see my recent work disconnected from actual locations or sense of time, functioning more as a disoriented mental map of sorts.

ZE: It looks like you started channelling obsession and anxiety more and more directly.

PV: Our brains have the capacity to weave elements together anyway. It's a neurological feature that is helping us to make sense of things and we do it subconsciously. As a filmmaker I don't have to tell a story from A to B at all. Absurdity and non-linearity create space for the viewer to make up their own mind, informed by their own sensitivities, assumptions and backgrounds.

ZE: Plague has an equally exciting visual language, with colourful, playful aesthetics and an absurdist storyline. Yet at the same time there's something deeply uncanny about it. A housefly that fantasizes about human extermination. Wow. How did you come up with this idea?

PV: In recent work I've invited non-human narrators to tell their side of the story, critiquing the contradictions in human behaviour. In Plague we're trapped in a fever dream of domesticity; absurdist comparisons between ecological and psychological breakdown unfold when Housefly meets Housewife. It's flipping the script around power dynamics. Housefly is a manipulative narrator using its fast paced lyrical musings to contemplate human extermination. For me Housefly is both victim and trickster, stuck between the polluted outdoors and the cramped indoors. It's not quite clear if Housefly is even 'real' or a figment of the housewife's imagination that's been plaguing her conscience.

ZE: And what are your feelings about domesticity?

PV: In the video I'm trying to weave together three meanings of domesticity to not ignore they're interrelated: our psyche as individual psychological home, our domestic physical space we create to live in, and the Earth as our shared habitat that we inhabit with all other species as our housemates. The overarching aim of Plague was to interlink experiences of psychological breakdown with ecological breakdown, using 'homesickness' as a metaphor for those interconnections. It was indirectly through the term Solastalgia, coined by environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht, that things started to fall into place for me conceptually. In short, Albrecht explains the phenomenon of Solastalgia as a homesickness while being at home, in particular with respect to the damage and change that human existence has caused to our life on planet Earth. For Plague this translated towards interlinking micro-macro meanings of home, from feeling homesick in our individual psyche, to our domestic sphere and our shared habitat the Earth.

ZE: How is this interest connected to personal experiences?

PV: I was raised by my mother who suffered from severe agoraphobia. Domesticity and the borders between the outdoors and indoors created a psychic prison. Surely this influenced elements of the work.

ZE: I remember from previous work that you unravelled the position of the female body in society, or maybe rather the burden of the so-called ability and maybe even task to procreate. For Plague, do you think that focus shifted from this individual, intimate pressure to another, yet related, more collective psychological state?

PV: I think all these works have a focus on the collective psyche, hacking common denominators and the archetypical status quo. I've been reading a lot of current feminist revisions on Karl Jung's theories of the collective conscience and archetypical images in the psyche. Housewife is the nemesis of Housefly in the domestic chronicles of Plague. Her look is loosely based on other classic archetypical homemaker characters like Marge Simpson, Donna Reed and Chantal Akerman's Jeanne Dielman. Housewife is deliberately quite a cringy character as an archetypical homemaker, yet strangely enough she seems hopelessly lost in her own home. When she encounters the Housefly she calls Pest Control to rescue her. However things take an eerie turn and quickly known laws of nature seem to

collapse. She drops into portals of her own imagination, in and out of hallucinations and parallel realities that haunt her conscience.

ZE: Makes me think. How do you perceive the state of the world right now?

PV: In *Plague Housewife* experiences a psychological meltdown that unfolds in uncanny synchronization with an ecological collapse of sorts. She comes to realize that perhaps she herself is actually the real plague that needs to be exterminated. Throughout her psychic hallucinations *Housewife* is hunted and haunted by a hybrid kind of creature, half housefly and housewife. It breaks the still prevailing bubble of a nature-culture dichotomy and thereby proposes that the only future is some form of symbiosis. I guess we should all distance ourselves more and more from the psychological *Housewife* in ourselves, and embrace our inner *Housefly* more.

ZE: What further influenced the script?

PV: For the first time I collaborated with a ghostwriter, who transformed my notes and research into a rhyme formatted rap to voice the *Housefly* character. It's been an exciting new turn into using lyrical speech in stead of the usual 'talking head' interview format in earlier works. A lot of inspiration comes from psychological science fiction such as 'Under Compulsion' by Thomas Disch and 'The Doll's Alphabet' by Camilla Grudova. Feminist approaches have in this respect been influential too, like 'When Species Meet' by Donna Haraway and the 'MaddAddam' trilogy of Margaret Atwood.

ZE: Taking the law of interdependency back to the studio. How did you make *Plague*?

PV: Often people assume I just sit at the computer all day and night to make a video work, which is partly true when it's render time. Before I did animate and edit everything digitally, but as said this recent shift in my practice has opened up lots of new working processes. Everything in *Plague* is highly constructed, using either digital or handcrafted layers that are animated together to create this warped and wonky perspective. Lots of the elements I create off screen, like the handcrafted masks and costumes, frame by frame stopmotion with selfmade puppets, the green screen studio set-up where I play all the characters in costume, making music and foley sounds, fabricate set design crafted from cardboard, and so on. Honestly I don't think I can ever go back to working fully digital again.

ZE: And what role did neurosis have in the making of the work?

PV: The lead role!

ZE: Ha.

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Zippora Elders, curator based between Berlin and Amsterdam, is co-curator at Sonsbeek 20-24 and director of Kunstfort bij Vijfhuizen (NL), where Puck Verkade made her first mural.