

How to Make (Use) (of Art)

Exhibition text on the occasion of the residency of Lorelinde Verhees
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Not for consumption. Nor for profit. Not for scientific, political or other purposes either. Not even for mere pleasure. The only purpose of art should be art itself. *L'art pour l'art*, art for art's sake, as the French Romantics would say. *Ohne Interesse*, disinterested, as Immanuel Kant had thought them. This is the condition of the "without" (*without* purpose, *without* use, *without* profit, *without* rules) that is characteristic of modern and contemporary art. It is this condition that is reflected in the whiteness and emptiness of the museum room, of the gallery wall, the studio, the residency.

For Lorelinde Verhees this condition is both something to investigate and to overcome. To investigate, because it encompasses for her the essence of what it means to *make* art. The empty walls and the blank page reflect the responsibility of the artist to fill them and the inevitable fear that follows from this responsibility. The empty walls force us to find in ourselves the stillest hour, the most vulnerable of words, since it is, in the words of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, "only the stillest words which bring the storm." It is only in this stillest hour that one can find the freedom that is needed to break loose, to interrupt patterns and to transform both oneself and the world – a force that is equally represented by the wide variety of female figures displayed in Verhees' work: Tanja Nijmeijer, Ingrid Betancourt, Simone de Beauvoir, Ruby Rubacuori, and artist-baker and activist Lexie Smith. For various different reasons, these women found within themselves an interstitial space, an irrepressible forming force that could not but bring forth a storm. In this respect the condition of making art is inextricably linked with the condition of social change.

On the other hand, Verhees views the condition of the without as no more than a temporary moment, a moment that should be overcome in order to pass on. The blankness of the page, the emptiness of the room – these are not sacred spaces that need to conserve, isolate, or to be dwelled in, but rather transitional phases that generate a creative power that needs to be put back into circulation. A clear illustration of this are the many newspapers, magazines and pieces of textile that entered the studio during Verhees' residency. Brought by the post or by accidental hands, many of them found their way into collages, that, in turn, can leave the studio again in order to serve the world. The same can be said for Verhees' previous artworks. Some of her old artworks are literally cut up and brought back into circulation. A large striped fabric exposed in *Kaus Australis* in 2013 is now transformed into a loose fitting costume. A ton of wax exposed in *P/////AKT* in 2017 is remelted into a series of geometrically shaped candles, to be burnt – why not – for mere pleasure. For Verhees, this is not a matter of desacralizing art, nor of adding symbolic or cultural value to otherwise ordinary objects. Rather, it is a radical acknowledgement of the fact that works of art no longer *work* when they remain locked within the conditional "without" of their genesis, that is, that they risk to stop being *works*, literally, in a practical, spiritual, critical, or recreational sense.

This two-step attitude – of acknowledging the condition of the without and of surpassing it – shows itself in the typically layered nature of Verhees' works, one that can best be described as a form of *obliteration*. To ob-literate means literally to put something on (*ob*) the letter (*littera*) in order to stop it from being readable. Engravings in tombstones obliterate as a result of dust and time. Words in a newspaper obliterate as a result of the many fingers that touch them. To obliterate something is thus to obstruct its readability – not by erasing it, but by covering it, by superimposing layers of use, habit, and practice. This is most clearly illustrated by Verhees' collages, in which pages from newspapers and magazines are covered by carefully chosen words and images. In turn, these pages often times cover pieces of textile. The purpose of this double obliteration is not to withdraw the meaning of these found objects from their original informative, commercial or practical value, but rather to *proliferate* this value. The collage's superimposition marks the fact that that these words, images and textiles were *seen*, heard, cherished – that they are erased *because* they are listened to and answered. "The erasure of the text engenders its proliferation, forces it," philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe holds in his text concerning the technique of obliteration, "It is as though writing, from the moment it starts, carried interpretation outside its own limits, obliged to take itself up again, to begin again, to repeat itself in every possible way, without, precisely, being able to stop."

For Verhees, art, then, is not a way to withdraw habitual meanings – of a news fact, a commercial image, a cloth – from their use value, but a way to condition and facilitate this use value, to prepare herself and us for the value they might have had, and will have, outside their own limits. Most literally, she focuses on the *means* to create this condition. As is illustrated by the short documentary film presented at the end of her residency, making art means for her to create the conditions for this value to appear. Instead of isolated works, we see the daily practice of living and working in the atelier, of furniture moved and conversations held. Significantly, for Verhees these means are not the respite and rest of contemplation, but *tools* in the most practical sense of the word, tools that are not least provided by her artworks themselves: a series of manuals for art-making, all kinds of working clothes for artists, a set of prayer pants – on which Tibetan prayer flags serve both as knee pads and as handy pockets for storing working gear – to be worn when praying to the Muse. This conditioning of the practical value of art is demonstrated through the online *Leo Art Market* curated by Verhees. Not only are most of the artworks made during her residency offered for sale, but part of the sale will also be used to micro-fund artists in financial need through the newly founded *Lioness Trust Fund*. In doing so, the Leo Art Market prevents the works from being entombed within the walls of the "without" and enables their obliterating power to *work*, in every possible way, without, precisely, being able to stop.

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