

Flos Wildschut
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Enter into office hours; a performance by Mariëlle Videler

Recently I gave a book in which I had written a text to a friend. It was the catalogue for the exhibition "8x5", which had been held in the autumn at the Foundation for Art and Culture in Arnhem. He examined the book with interest: he smelled it, handled the cover, estimated the weight and turned over the pages. A real booklover, just like me!

But by thumbing through the pages something went wrong. Appalled he gave the book back: "There's a page torn out", he said indignantly. "You got a damaged copy, you have to bring it back!" He was right--one page was torn out. And I knew it. Of course I should have prepared my friend. How could I tell him that this was intentional? "Intentional....?"

Every artist participating in the exhibition was given one page to design in his or her own way. There was one artist, Mariëlle Videler, who interpreted this offer by tearing the page out. This was the result of a performance entitled "Enter into office hours", that she presented on the day of the opening.

During the opening, I experienced the shocking effect that the torn-out page caused my friend in intensified form. With a drink in hand, I tried to look attentively at the works in the exhibition, every now and then distracted by some familiar and biting sound, which I couldn't place. A surprise waited on the first floor. In a claustrophobic storage room filled with shelves full of office supplies sat Mariëlle Videler, totally dressed in white, on a chair that was hanging high in the air. She looked like a small, sweet girl. But the scene was far from sweet. A strong lamp was pointed at her, as if she was subject to an examination and was forced to give a confession. The fierce light, that went on and off every sixteen seconds, made the space sweltering.

Videler didn't say a word, but every time that the space lit up, she picked a catalogue out of the cabinet, opened it--every time faultlessly to the same page--and carefully tore the page out. Like a mechanical action, over and over again. Suddenly I recognized the sound that had followed me through the whole building. Videler placed the mutilated book without any emotion in a closet on the other side of the space. In one day she managed to dispose of that one page from all one thousand copies. The row with intact copies

shrunk, the shelf on the other side grew fuller. Pieces of paper formed a shiny yellow carpet on the floor.

In the catalogues only the rudimentary remnants of this performance are visible: the frayed edges of a missing sheet.

Why in God's name? What was printed on the page in question? Secret information? No, then Videler would not have scattered it. Did she disapprove of the contents of the page? Did something go wrong at the designer's or printer's and was it too late to correct this mistake in a less obvious way?

Tearing a page out of a book is in my eyes the same as committing sacrilege. It is unforgivable.

I already have a problem with people who find it necessary to dog-ear a book. And I absolutely cannot stand people who press a book flat with the required pressure when they get a book in their hands for the first time so that the book will stay open. With a badly injured back as consequence. Horrible!

But yes, I'm an art historian. I love to fathom the work of an artist. Then you have to overcome certain aversions. With her performances Mariëlle Videler is looking for a confrontation with the public. Sometimes she seeks it in a very physical approach, like in "*Fleckerlwalzer*". Dressed in a black suit, her lips painted fiery red, Videler went through the city with a bucket of white paint and a brush. She stood in public, painted a circle around her and invited male passers-by to embrace her inside the circle. After the embrace she thanked the man and moved on, looking for new embraces, leaving a trace of circles behind.

One can point to obvious parallels between "*Fleckerlwalzer*" and "*Enter into office hours*". Clothes play an important role; a black suit; a white suit. In both cases, Videler dresses up. The suit is a mask. In this way she can literally enter another skin. The color seems essential and symbolic.

Black and white are opposite to each other. In the European culture black has a negative connotation. Black is the colour of mourning, darkness, and bears a diabolic aspect in itself. While white is seen as symbol of virginity and unaffected innocence. White garments are in many cultures symbol of purity and truth. But white has also negative symbolic aspects. In dreams the white horse is often connected with the experience and the presentiment of death. Ghosts are in many cultures seen as white figures. In many Asian and African cultures on the other hand not black, but just white the colour of mourning and death.

The bright white light in the small room creates the same dualism. It refers to the higher, the absolute, the truth, but causes at the same time an oppressive atmosphere.

Also the white circle can be interpreted in many ways: it creates security for the one inside the circle, but keeps outsiders out. They remain in the void, infinity, which is symbolised by the circle.

By the drawing of a circle or by retreating into a small room Videler defines her "playground" in both performances. Videler visualises the virtual circle that the human (un)consciously draws around himself. As soon as someone enters that circle and comes too close, it can cause an unpleasant feeling. Only a few are permitted in this intimate sphere.

Videler makes this very clear and therefore the viewer will not enter her playground that easily. The drawing of a line, a real or symbolic one, points towards a power position. The artist versus the viewer. Videler challenges the viewer, but creates the awareness of exactly where the border is. And that border is set by Videler. Only by invitation did men step into the circle. I have crossed the threshold of the small room on purpose, but that was not comfortable.

I wanted to see what was on the yellow pages....Nothing. An empty page has meaning. The tabula rasa, the unwritten page is a symbol for wanting to break with precedence, willing to start with a clean slate. No page means nothing, but tearing out an empty page makes the meaning all the fuller.

When studying the catalogue more closely something else attracts attention. Every artist has submitted a photo of himself for the book. Again Videler leaves us in uncertainty. We see the outline of her hair. Her face is a blind spot. It seems as if Videler doesn't want to expose herself. We can watch her performances, read her CV, but are held back by an invisible line as we want to get to know the real "her". Then there is nobody there. Being not present has something melancholic about it. We can have enormous desires for something that (no longer) exists. Even if that is emptiness. On the page before the torn-out page is a text by Imke Zuiderveld. It's subject--how appropriately--is emptiness: "Emptiness is quality. Often it only is recognized when it is no longer there", writes Zuiderveld.

I remain convinced--tearing a page out of a book is and remains a sin. But I eagerly forgive Mariëlle Videler.