

**Observatorium**  
*observations on the present state*

**exhibition notes**

# Observatorium in collaboration with Bram Esser 'observations on the present state'

April 19 - June 14, 2009

Over the last decade, the artists' collective **Observatorium**, which consists of **Geert van de Camp**, **Andre Dekker** and **Ruud Reutelingsperger**, has realised an impressive international body of work, comprising various temporary and permanent three-dimensional pieces in the public environment. Stroom Den Haag presents the first major survey of these projects. The history of Observatorium is recounted by **Bram Esser**. Like a scout, he has explored twelve Observatorium works on the basis of the topographical coordinates. He formulates, visualizes the perspective and questions. His journey past the different works, his travel account, the images and the souvenirs are all attributes of the narrative/presentation 'observations on the present state'. These collected reflections, Esser's physical presence in a new Observatorium installation, the interaction with the visitors and the Observatorium archive together form the core of this retrospective.

The projects of Observatorium are objects that virtually without exception are intended to create an opportunity for concentration, contemplation and observation. They are often monumental works of art erected alongside highways, in city parks, in new residential developments and near industrial heritage sites. One example many motorists will know is the pavilion at the Nieuw-Terbegge traffic junction (Rotterdam). Functioning in the realm of the visual arts, they take their themes from architecture and landscape design. In the words of the artists themselves: 'Observatorium focuses on daydreams, leisure and pleasure, the needs of the individual, the love of things'.

Antonella da Messina's painting 'St. Jerome in his study' (ca.1460) serves as a foundation for the work of Observatorium. It depicts elements that also recur throughout the exhibition: a platform, cupboards, statues, texts, animals and a human figure who narrates, reads and symbolises contemplation.

The artists **Geert van de Camp**, **Andre Dekker** and **Ruud Reutelingsperger** have collaborated under the name of Observatorium since 1997. The book 'Big Pieces of Time', an artist's book the Observatorium design philosophy, will be published this year by 010 Publishers.

## **Bram Esser**

Bram Esser (Apeldoorn, 1976) studied philosophy in Groningen and is currently active as an author/publicist with a special love for the city, architecture and urban life. He contributed to publications like FARB: Moderne Architectuur in Groningen; AU! 'Bouwen aan de architectuur van de Zorg' and wrote the script for the recently published graphic novel 'The Society Club'.

## **Reference points**

The Observatorium exhibition is the first in a series of 'reference points'. Artists and artists' collectives play an important part in Stroom's policy and programme. Several of these artists can be seen as playing a directive role. In order to stay focused and inspired, Stroom aims to pay specific attention to these artists.

## **Acknowledgment**

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## **More information online**

[www.stroom.nl](http://www.stroom.nl)  
<http://observatoriumrotterdam.blogspot.com/>  
[www.observatorium.org](http://www.observatorium.org)  
[www.bramesser.com](http://www.bramesser.com)  
[www.010.nl](http://www.010.nl)

# Bijhouwer lecture by Observatorium De Doelen, Rotterdam

November 7, 2008

*The Bijhouwer lecture accompanies the Bijhouwer award, which is presented every two years to a landscape architect for his very special body of work. The lecture focuses on a specific phenomenon in the development of landscape architecture. On the occasion of the award ceremony for West 8 in 2008, Observatorium was invited to talk about the relationship between art and landscape and the present state of their work.*

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Wageningen Landscape Architecture Alumni Association, I wish to sincerely thank you for your invitation to talk here about landscape architecture and art. The invitation refers to six speakers, of whom five boast an engineering degree. I feel like an alien phenomenon in the world of landscape design. This lecture is intended to shed light on the connection between the Earth and a meteor.

## **Meteors and parks**

Last summer, Observatorium was invited by the city museum to visit the chemical and aluminium centre of Krasnoyarsk in Siberia. The city and its environs are prosperous, population levels are increasing, the air is polluted, the local atom and plutonium industry is being cleaned up by the Americans and from all corners of the city, one has a good view of the surrounding mountains and wilderness. Krasnoyarsk actually comprises two cities: the minus 30°C city and the plus 30°C city.

The Theatre and the museum are located in a pedestrian area. This area has monuments (for the Siberian writer Astafiyev), flower beds, ornamental birches, pedestrian overpasses and, above all, a proliferation of lawns criss-crossed by footpaths. The park has beautiful pine trees and birches, just like the woodlands surrounding the city. You could create a Siberian park in Rotterdam in no time at all. But here, the lawns would be green, while over there, they are brown – due to either the cold or the heat.

The museum is located on historic ground in the heart of the city – on the site of the first enclosure and the town's first wooden houses. Stalinist urban planning has reserved the finest site along the riverbank for culture, as if in Rotterdam, Schouwburgplein, De Doelen, the Theatre and the Kunsthal were to be situated at the foot of the Erasmus Bridge – although the square of Schouwburgplein would be transected by the road to Irkutsk and the mighty Maas River would be three times as wide.

It is strange to see these two showpieces of the Stalinist Era situated so prominently on the riverfront, surrounded by a field full of grass-plots and footpaths. The only communication existing between the building and the surrounding area is its isolation, so that it seems a behemoth in these environs. Is this a park? Hardly anything grows here. Is this the city centre? It's located on the edge of town. And why can't you reach it by car? Do people actually visit this place? The two temples lie like meteors in the fields. The park resembles an impact zone. Why are museums built in a park, on the edge of a park? Which museum can make do without a park?

The exhibition was called *Tunguska Phenomenon*.

Tunguska is one of the great world mysteries! Exactly 100 years ago, an explosion circled the Earth three times and flattened 15 square kilometres of woodland area in the Siberian taiga. An enormous amount of light collected in the atmosphere – in London, you could read The Times outdoors at night. To this very day, it is unknown what caused this event, although Italians, Russians, Germans and Americans still journey to the taiga to find out the origin of the largest impact ever on earth. The literature generally assumes that it was the impact of a meteor or an asteroid, although no fragment of such a body has ever been found. The impact has transformed the landscape, however, and despite its remote location, Tunguska has become a popular area for scientists and lovers of science fiction. The meteor and the landscape have become inseparable. And this insight got us thinking about art and landscape architecture. The greatest opposition to this theory comes from a Russian, who says that due to a paucity of evidence, we should seek the cause of this event in our own atmosphere. He refers to a geometeor: 'an explosion of energetic high-speed ball-lightning'.

The longer ago the event took place, the more stories and hypotheses circle around the globe. Therefore, the exhibition would not so much focus on the scientific angles, as it would on the stories and fantasies surrounding the impact. Countless people view Tunguska as proof of extraterrestrial life – as late as 2007, scientists discovered stone inscriptions that have been left behind by the aliens that had crashed into Earth with their spaceship. What a pity that they didn't end up off the Dutch coast.

The meteor wasn't the only thing that appeared out of thin air – so did the invitation to come to Siberia, the intense interest shown in our work by the curator and his penetrating writings on our work. We ourselves landed like comets on the boards of the Yenisei River, after an 8-hour flight through six time zones. All preparations for our participation and our explorations via Google Earth took place via the Internet and e-mail. Our sculpture was ultimately constructed on location by the museum's carpenter on the basis of instructions from Rotterdam. No wonder we saw the Museum Complex in the brown park as a meteor.

That same year, another assignment came as a bolt out of the blue in Rotterdam, for a similar location: a museum and a park. Due to the construction of a new parking garage, the travelling theatre boulevard De Parade, which always pitches its tents in Museumpark, had to deal with space constraints. They asked us to come up with a clever ruse. How could we create more space for our tents? We would like to fill in the ponds of the Netherlands Architecture Institute!

And then, with an eye trained by our Siberian experiences, we noticed how in Rotterdam, as in Krasnoyarsk, every museum was situated like a meteor in the city. Maybe not with as much surrounding space as in Krasnoyarsk, but nevertheless. We also noticed that the museums are connected to the city on one side and are located in the park along the three remaining sides. We saw that the park

does not connect these institutes to one another. They are located a stone's throw from each other, they share the same Museumspark address, and yet the park does not function as a connecting space (among other reasons, because none of the meteors have an entrance opening out on the park).

And what happens if De Parade forces itself in between the museum meteors and the villa meteors? Will the park disappear off the face of the earth for the next couple of weeks? Will you no longer be able to cross from one museum to the next?

The solution was to raise the park and the paths between the different museums into the air, so that the scarce amount of public space would be preserved and the public would be treated to a splendid view of the construction site, De Parade and the surrounding buildings. We gained extra space by making an enclosure that served as an elevated street. And strangely enough, up there on this 'Traverse', we started to gradually understand that as a structure, the elevated public space formed a better and more attractive museum park, with a fine view of the tents as flowers and of people scratching around like birds. To put it in the terminology of urban planning: with an enormous increase of red, the green had become greener. If you want a park, you need to build an enclosure; this park is not closed off. If you want to connect the museums with one another – if you want to merge the meteors and their ground zero – you will need to make an entrance for the entire area. If you want to create a vibrant outdoor area – you shouldn't give the people permits, but space. Our programme for the 'Traverse' above De Parade included opera, stories, song and theatre and was called 'Publieke Geheimen' ('Public Secrets'). There something fundamentally wrong with Rotterdam's Museumspark! Indeed, even Krasnoyarsk is more attractive: in the summertime, the local entrepreneurs are allowed to construct a little oven outdoors for them to sell their meat dishes.

### **Observatorium and landscape architecture**

The 'Traverse' for De Parade forms a merging of landscape architecture and art. It is landscape architecture, as it offers an area for relaxation within the boundaries of the city; it is a park design, because it organises the open-air space. And it serves as an example in the talks that are currently being held about the future of this area.

It is art because it constitutes a concept. It is art because the suggestion is stronger than the form. It is art because it invites the visitor to open his senses and increases his receptiveness. It is also art because besides having a practical side and promoting pleasure, it also offers a sizeable amount of je-ne-sais-quoi.

### **What is Observatorium?**

Observatorium is the result of conversations between three different characters about construction, presentation and experience. The best idea is to illustrate this point by recounting how we came about. Geert, a sculptor, makes sectional works that are so large that you could easily fill a whole hall with them. Andre, a draughtsman, uses these sculptures for a period of seclusion in the exhibition space and publishes drawings and texts. While visiting this exhibition, Ruud, a painter, invites the sculptor and the draughtsman to make an environment for his exhibition of paintings. Each of us three entertains a

fantasy about space: the one to construct in, the second to stay in, and the third to display.

In essence, this is what an Observatorium work literally amounts to: a structure in a domain, where you can stay and which at the same time shows an idea, a desire or symbolic system. It is therefore a sculpture, but it is also a space for a person to do something in, to observe or to reflect. As well as everything that reflection entails, musing, memory, consciousness. And this process is the most productive and exciting outdoors – in a museum this idea would seem contrived; outside it is wilful, tough, vulnerable and subject to a wide range of laws and rules. Our finest assignment lies outdoors – something we have in common with landscape architecture – but at the same time, what we want most in the open air is to turn your gaze inwards.

We use our talks to coordinate our personal fantasies. Our ideas about art in the landscapes develop in the space between the different characters. Because that's where our field of activity can be found. The common denominator is located in the overlap of three auras: time and opportunity for attention. In a museum, this is a matter of course – as it is in a garden – but not along a motorway, on an industrial site or at an event: those are the kind of locations and landscapes that we work in.

### **How is it possible that three artists are able to work together, is what people often wonder.**

Usually, my answer is, isn't the whole world organised like that? Everyone works together. And people's answer to this is often: that's precisely the issue – artists are individuals and need as much space as they can get for themselves. At that point, I usually have nothing left to say. But on this occasion, I can tell you: there are artists who don't need as much space as they can get for their own imagination, but rather aim to work together on a fantasy that is greater than anything they could realise on their own. The main challenge is to strengthen the position of the dream and the fantasy within the complexity of the assignments and the world around us, and to already test ideas against the other party's views at the start of the design process. Even before the client does this, we do it ourselves. We are familiar with the various considerations of sustainability, maintenance, vandal-proof construction and responsibility. The only aspects that we do not have the power to change are the jury vote and the balance of power when multiple parties are involved.

We have a common enthusiasm for the wondrous beauty of the constructed environment – of the work of man. How we make, add, develop; how water systems, industrial sites, motorways, amusement parks, reallocations, urban extensions are applied wet-on-wet – like in a painting – to a base of numerous other studies, objects and masterpieces. In short, how we constantly fine-tune the surface, the utility, the composition and the colour of our country.

Try crossing the Netherlands by train in a diagonal line and indicating an area where in the past twenty years you couldn't find a bulldozer pushing over buildings, an asphalt machine laying down a new road, or a construction firm erecting what amounts to half a city. And if you do happen to find such an area, didn't it recently require major maintenance work, site subdivision or entertainment? We are permanently working on the Delta Works, from the Western Scheldt to Lauwersmeer. Sometimes this work is coordinated, but at any rate it takes place everywhere at

the same time and nearly always on the same scale. This is worrying. Only in the cities and in the regions with a large Calvinist contingent do you come across areas that have remained unaltered. To take myself as a measure: wherever I come, nothing is ever more than a hundred years old. And I'm fifty! So half of my daily surroundings were made in my lifetime. Cool.

We did not choose to involve ourselves in landscape architecture; we chose space – the space where humanity forms an image of the Earth and itself. We needed space for our own images. And while in the past, we borrowed parks and gardens to realise these images, we now seek to collaborate with landscape architects, in order to guarantee a place for our images and concepts within a transformation of a landscape. The terminology of German landscape architecture has a French word for what we do: Staffage – the scenery, the set pieces and the buildings in a park. Occasionally, this is also a foil. But we use the Staffage to liven up the landscape, and we try to create a space where people pause for a moment and surrender themselves to wonder and reflection. That's the finest achievement of all: that a person pauses in your work, for your work, and becomes aware of his or her habitat, the Earth.

So what is the subject: how can art be of practical use in such turbulent, frenetic building activity? How can art stay true to itself? How can art find a place in landscape architecture? We had a meeting about this lecture.

**Geert** said: So very often, we make pars pro toto; we construct images, we make points in which you can see the landscape reflected – like in a convex mirror.

*Motto: Connect separated worlds*

For the isolated inner-city VINEX residential neighbourhood Nieuw Terbregge, Observatorium designed a prospect point and an enclosed garden with a pavilion on the noise barrier that lies between the neighbourhood and the A20 motorway. Later, this area also accommodated a memorial for the food drops of 1945. The pavilion resembles a house on the dike, an archetype of Dutch architecture, but it is constructed out of highway materials and forms a garden within the park. To ensure our sculpture is not a meteor, we have constructed the gabion of the noise barrier around the structure and consequently embedded the project in the noise barrier. In addition, it is, like a real meteor, partially submerged in the earth.

**Ruud** said: Our strength lies in the creation of a lively public space as well as the fact that we also supply a programme when we handle the assignment for a sculpture. In Zollverein in Essen, for instance, where at our initiative, the delineation of Zollvereinpark became a new domain for free programming, individual initiative and reception.

*Motto: Observatorium makes carcass work*

If nobody uses the sculpture, the work is not complete. Observatorium likes to stir things up, and enjoys seeing people tinker or build further on a sculpture. This porter's lodge actually doubles as a private exhibition space, a private garden for encounters or simply as a pastiche or a beacon. It is a meteor because essentially, it had not been requested in the assignment. It is a space that provides Zollverein with an opportunity to be generous – they can lend it to others for private initiatives. To ensure that the meteor does not swim behind the site, we have constructed a small crater rim, which we have developed into its own domain.

**Andre** said: We should talk about the follies, which may appear to be self-contained, but whose key aspect is actually the decision to pause and reflect on the world that you have just left. Along the A57 motorway in Germany, for instance, where the steel skeleton of a coal-mound forms an Acropolis and where every hour of the day, people look in silence at the Ruhr Area, the motorways and the wide vistas. *Motto: Design what is already there*

Observatorium has learned that you can also design by doing nothing. Designing can also mean recognising the mystery and perfection of a location and leaving it alone. Making the 'Berg der Stille' plan for a coal-mound in Germany, Observatorium and WES, Hamburg shared the conviction that this empty mountain of coal needed to remain empty. Our design involved the protection of this emptiness. The landmark Hallenhaus is the symbol of this intention. Here, we did not need to ensure that the meteor gains its own domain; rather the whole mound is its domain.

### **What do meteors do in a landscape?**

They offer the visitor a target, a point to arrive at and turn around at, they provide the landscape with a space that invites and encourages a person to do something, they offer a person a location for musing. This is what art can achieve in landscape architecture. Together, they can provide time and space for giving attention – attention to the outdoor space, where that meteor and the landscape are located, and attention to the space inside us, to internal contemplation. This is the description of an ideal. That is the description of the collaboration between our disciplines, between working with nature and working with images.

The Tungaska Event in Siberia is a mystery – it inspires questions and leads people to devise answers, it makes people curious, evokes a sense of wonder and makes you realise that the world is whizzing through the universe. It stimulates creativity. If only we could achieve something similar! In the taiga, an unknown force has transformed an anonymous site into an area that leads us to think that we can discover something about the world and ourselves. We want to do the same thing, but we can only rely on the work of man.

In New York, Observatorium once tried to cause an impact, not by making a meteor, but by creating a crater – a polder. For once, we took on the role of the environmental planner and the landscape designer. And we invited designers to design meteors for this project. The dikes of the polder have since been washed away, but the landscape design has been preserved for all eternity, thanks to Max Westerman. The submerged remains of the polder Netherland, NY, are located one nautical mile from Governors Island, for which location West 8 has developed a beautiful plan.

Ladies and Gentlemen of West 8, I wish to congratulate you on winning the Bijhouwer Award, which definitely did not appear out of the blue!

**Observatorium**  
**Geert van de Camp**  
**Andre Dekker**  
**Ruud Reutelingsperger**

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