

Master presentations

19 – 20 June 2020

Jānis Balodis
Merel Smitt

DAS
theatre

WRITTEN BY
Silvia Bottioli

A couple of metres farther, a few moments later

It's late spring while I am writing these lines.

In the region I come from, it is the season of fireflies. They glimmer in early night hours, in fields and forests, and sometimes even in city parks.

From a human perspective, one of the most outstanding qualities of fireflies is their relation to visibility. They are pure appearances, manifesting in and from the darkness, lighting it with their soft and extremely fragile light. Darkness is necessary for us to be able to see them. In that same darkness they disappear, to then reappear again a bit farther.

This dance is their way of attracting female partners, an invitation for reproduction. Their appearance is not just seductive to their own species, but also for us human spectators. Indeed, we are enchanted by fireflies' precision and smallness, and fascinated by the mysterious forces that guide their movements in time and space.

As spectators of this beautiful and mysterious dance, there is only one thing that we know for sure. We have to keep watching

and cultivate our capacity to spectate.¹ We have to switch off the lights, let darkness take all the space. We have to wait and sustain the uncertainty (will they appear tonight? Is it too early? Too late? Will they come back this year too? Is the air too polluted for them?).

Once we see the first tiny light glimmering in the night, all we have to do is stay in suspense, keep our senses alert, and wait to see the next one, or maybe the same one lighting up again a couple of metres farther, a few moments later...

Multiple lessons can be learnt from the fireflies, and from us watching them. The most valuable, in the moment I am writing in, seems to be the value of invisibility and of waiting. Fireflies are loaded with the promise that if we don't give up, if we preserve the right conditions, if we keep watching, we will indeed see. We do not exactly know when or where, but the fireflies will come back, spring after spring, to lighten our dark nights and revive their promise of enchantment and seduction.

In her famous *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*², Peggy Phelan writes that

“performance becomes itself through disappearance”. Similar to the fireflies, performance can only be seen and caught by our senses in the moment it appears. Its volatile and ephemeral nature is so powerful in reason of its possibility – or rather its fate – to disappear. Same as the fireflies, the very possibility for performance to exist, is connected to the possibility to not be there, or not be visible.

The ontological negativity of performance, a vulnerability that is connected to the gaze of its spectators, and the promise that it always entails, are currently more crucial than ever. Theatre, as the broad field that also comprises performance, is about coming together. It is about staying in darkness. It is about trusting the invisible and waiting for something to appear.

Theatre is all about believing that our appointment will be met again. This is how the seven performative works were created by the graduating DAS Theatre participants: under the particular circumstances that forced their appointment to be postponed, doubted, dreamed about, cherished, and tended towards.

Each of these works propose a specific way for us to meet with art and with each other. Most of them renew the promise for an appointment that cannot be met now, but operates as a reminder to continue to watch and trust that the darkness will softly be enlightened again. There will we meet. A couple of metres farther, a few moments later...

¹ See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Survival of the Fireflies*, University of Minnesota Press 2018.
² Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Taylor & Francis 1993.

MEREL SMITT

HOW TO START A MOVEMENT



HOW TO START A *MOVEMENT* is a series of interventions and missions in which different individuals get the opportunity to explore, question and disrupt the protocols, dynamics and rules of (semi) public spaces, institutions and venues. The missions consist of instructions you receive and execute together or individually. You can receive these instructions through printed cards, digital channels, verbally and so on. Some of the missions are role playing games with specific roles and instructions, others are workshops, multi-interpretable assignments or instructions you can do on your own whenever you feel the need to raise your voice or respond to the harsh reality. With some you need to be physically present, others you can do from your home using the internet, your telephone or non-electronic mail. By creating different types of missions with different threshold levels it is possible for everybody to join the movement at some point to take back their power, claim their voice, and empower themselves by setting something in motion.

Merel Smitt is an artist based in Rotterdam. She builds immersive installations and creates interventions in the public space that interfere with our daily lives. Her work is research based, site-specific and the audience, knowingly and unknowingly, participate in various ways. You may come across one of her projects in situations or settings where you don't expect art to happen.

Her projects often result in multiple outcomes that can be seen together as a whole but can also be experienced separately. The output consists of installations, websites, fictional campaigns, score-books, audio-tours, walks, role playing games and so on. The impact of the work lies within the participants; they become aware of the way certain frameworks produced by political and social systems in our society influence our environment, behaviour and interactions. Her projects can be seen as methodologies to rethink protests and social movements, occupy spaces, raise voices, and set something in motion.

www.merelsmitt.nl

WRITTEN BY
Felizitas Stilleke

Take a close look!
There she stands.
On the coast.
At the edge of a cliff,
in the middle of the surf.
She's facing the wind,
breaking the waves,
feeling the spray.
Brave. Open. Fearless.
Without moving
she is standing there
so we can see her.
So, look! Look closely!
She's a strong woman,
she's an artist,
she's an adventurer
and she comes from the
land of water and tides.
There she stands.
Breaking the waves.
Taking up the fight
as the strong woman she is.
The artist, the adventurer.

Take a close look!
There she stands.
She is playing.
She is observing.
She sees everything
and everyone.
She guides and directs.
She cackles and betrays.
She loses and leads the game.
She plays.
You can walk through walls with her but you
have to let it happen.
She won't push you,
or teach you how or when.

She'll only show you
that it's possible.
She'll show you
what is necessary.
When she's still, you will move.
When she's playing, you will play.
When she's watching, you will see.
When she's guiding, you will conjure.
She is the game within you.

Take a close look!
There she stands.
She wants to start a movement.
With you.
As you.
Inside you.
That's what she stands for and
that's why she is standing
next to you.
Behind you.
Beneath you.
How to start a movement?
How to even start?
Look closely.
There is already
a movement.
With you.
As you.
And inside you.
As long as you keep moving,
you will move the world.
That's what she stands for.

Take a close look!
There she stands.
Not speaking.
Not moving.
Yet, she says a great deal and moves

everything around.
Because she stands where she stands.
She stands up against it.
Showing herself.
As a woman she knows how to be patient
like the water and silent like the calm
depth of a lake.
She listens to every drop of the ocean but
swirls around with rage when impatience
catches up with her.
Her work is a manifesto of the sea.

Take a close look!
There she stands.
In front of the places she builds for
you to dwell in. Places in which your
expectations, imaginations and
experiences can settle down.
She creates the circumstances for
that to happen.
She holds you,
and carries you.
And to those of you
who cannot (yet)
accept her invitation,
we say:
it is important
to look closely.

Take a close look!
There she stands.
Against efficient, effective and
result-based thinking.
Fighting the neoliberal art market by
deliberately questioning its ideology,
to intentionally create an uncertainty
that is frighteningly powerful.
And to those of you who don't know
how to take a stand yet,
we say:
Follow the movement.
Follow the experiment.
Follow the unknown.
Follow her and you will discover in Merel
Smitt's work the subversive power of
a feminist art practice in which the ego
loses itself through collaboration and thus
wins everything there is to win: self-
empowerment, solidarity, joy, creation
and the infinite vastness of the sea.

Take a close look!
You can see it.
You can experience it.
Come close!
Closer...

PROJECT UPDATE

HOW TO START A *MOVEMENT* began in september 2018 and has welcomed 100 participants since. When joining the movement, participants engage with everyday life in a different way. They explore, in an intimate yet collective way, the dynamics and rules that we produce, follow and maintain on a personal, political and societal level.

A participant will normally go through four parts of the *MOVEMENT*:

part I: the individual training over the course of 18 days.

part II: the mission briefing of half an hour.

part III: the collective mission of 1 hour.

part IV: the collective debriefing, varying from 15 min to 3 hours.

Due to the COVID-19 crisis only part I and part IV could be executed: the individual training and the collective debriefing. All parts of the movement are designed to function as stand-alone interventions as well as a whole, this way the movement can always take place, no matter where we are or under what circumstances we are living.

The individual training (between **June 2nd** and **June 19th 2020**), could be completed from home, within the frame of everyday life, respecting the rules of a 1.5 meter society. Over the course of 18 days each participant receives 14 envelopes in their mailbox. Each envelope consists of instructions, readings, messages, material and traces from the movement with which the participant engages with.

At the collective debriefing, in a digital space on **June 19th 2020**, the gang meets each other to share their traces.

At the moment the experience is limited to a small group of people. A larger audience is reached online through following the process on Instagram (@merelsmitt) within the time-frame June 2nd and June 19th 2020.

There is also the possibility of receiving the publication of **HOW TO START A *MOVEMENT*** that will be published at the end of the summer. Please contact me at howtostartamovement@merelsmitt.nl if you are interested in receiving this.

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DAS
theatre



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