

SEEFHOEK SERIES - THOMAS VERSTRAETEN

23 November - 22 December 2024

In September 2023, together with about five hundred local residents, Verstraeten created the seven-part location project Seefhoek Series, an ode to a hyper-diverse area in the north of Antwerp called the Seefhoek; an ode to the neighbourhood he lives in. The project was an attempt to penetrate the soul of a city district. It was a meditation on a resilient but neglected neighbourhood.

For the exhibition at the gallery, he revisits Seefhoek Series. Using videos, photographic material, scale models, and installations, he takes a fresh look at Seefhoek Series, trying to uncover new layers of meaning. Of the original seven performances, which were scattered across different locations and took place at different times, the focus is now on four projects. These come together in the exhibition space and engage in a dialogue with each other:

- *21st Century Portrait*. A street football match was professionally filmed and broadcast live by local TV station ATV, complete with stadium lights, advertising panels, drone shots, steadycam footage, slow motion, and commentary and analysis by two local football commentators.
- *Met de krik ketsen*: In Park Spoor Noord, youngsters from the Afghan community have long played cricket, a sport introduced to England by Flemish weavers in the 17th century. In *Met de krik ketsen*, the cricket match was transformed into a theatrical event with dramatic lighting, a mesmerizing soundscape, choreographic patterns of movement, and a large painted backdrop that gently glided by, depicting three different landscapes: from Antwerp to England, to Afghanistan, and back again.
- *Looking for Harmony*. Dozens of local residents walked, cycled, or drove around the streets of the Seefhoek following a set route. They were equipped with small portable speakers playing their favorite songs. The Seefhoek was transformed into a live DJ set: an eclectic, loosely choreographed soundscape that represented the diversity of the neighborhood.
- *Urbi et Orbi*. While the other performances took place in public spaces, Verstraeten made the reverse move with *Urbi et Orbi*: he brought the street into the theatre. He asked the preacher, who preaches the word of God every week at Astridplein, to repeat his performance in Bourlaschouwburg. On stage, Verstraeten recreated a fragment of Astrid Square in perspective, referring to Italian architect Palladio's Teatro Olimpico.

In the exhibition space, Verstraeten adds a new layer to Seefhoek Series, showing us, through magnifications of reality, the undeniable complexity of life in the city. Equally, he makes us witness the fragility and vitality of urban life.

Verstraeten theatricalizes daily life on the streets of his neighborhood. He does not establish a royal, 'perfect' view of the Seefhoek – quite the contrary: he is more concerned with the 'flat' view that Georges Perec discusses in his essay *Approaches to What?*. However, he borrows the format of theatrical spectatorship for this purpose: we watch the cricket and street football matches as if they were performances. Together with residents, he appropriated public space – for the duration of the performance – by theatricalizing it and creating a particular perspective. He focuses our gaze on something mundane for just long and intense enough to make us look at it effectively. In Perec's essay, it reads: "What we need to problematize is the brick, the concrete, the glass, our table manners, our tools, our implements, our use of time, our rhythms. Problematising what to us seems to have nothing amazing left." In another essay, *Spaces Around*, Perec is even more explicit: "Noting what you see. Noting what is remarkable. Are we even capable of noticing what is remarkable? Is there anything that strikes us? Nothing strikes us. We are unable to see. We need to take a different, more cautious approach, to almost dumb ourselves down. Forcing ourselves to write down what has no importance, the most obvious, the most ordinary, the most trivial. (...) Forcing ourselves to take a flatter view. (...) Reading what's on the street: billboards, newspaper kiosks, posters, traffic signs, graffiti, leaflets thrown on the ground, shop signs."

What vibrates beneath the city's surface, Verstraeten captures like a seismologist. He sets the wiring of that network in motion again above ground. As a result, the carelessness surrounding us every day – whether it concerns strangers, habits, or places – takes on new significance.

Besides being an artistic ode to the neighborhood, Seefhoek Series breaks open the usual viewing codes. Verstraeten's attempt to theatricalize the city firmly shakes up the relationship between viewer and actor. Antwerp's most diverse district is given a new role. Generations of local residents from different backgrounds meet for the first time. Like a thread, these connections run through the various interventions, forming a network that is shared with the whole city.

Credits:

Concept: Thomas Verstraeten

With: 500 residents of the Seefhoek

Sound design: Senjan Jansen

Photographs: Wannes Cré

Video direction: Simon Cools Fierlafijn, Arno Weijdema, Jonathan Van Hemelrijck

Video editing: Lynn Van Oijstaeijen

Exhibition build-up: Casper Engels, Maarten Dockx, Victor Boni, Antoine Maes, Luc Galle, Patrick Graça da Silva Rosa

Co-production: Toneelhuis

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