

LABELLING ERIK

A Lecture written for Students of Leeds Metropolitan University
Delivered on the 27th of October 2008

Hello I am Erik Alkema, I'm from Amsterdam and I'm an artist.

I don't have a problem in calling myself an artist, because that is what I am, that is what I do, and everything needs a combination of letters to be able to communicate it, but after declaring that (to be an artist), it's guaranteed that you will be asked to make yourself more clear.

'Ow, an artist (this can be said in many different ways), so what do you do?, most of the time followed by the word 'painting' question-mark '

And there is where I lost a lot of people I introduced myself to. By flooding them with the enormous amount of answer to that question:

'Well yes I do painting, but also drawing and illustration, I make video-works, I do sculpture, I make puppets and costumes. Installation, writing... ', and if wanted to really lose them beyond comprehension I could add: 'and I teach, different kind of subjects in art-school, I curate exhibitions and I used to organise parties, where I also made the visuals for.....and...(I don't even mention performance or making t-shirts)
And now I'm working on this documentary'

And then I didn't even tell them that I like to mix all this media up and combine them in various ways.

Okay, that's what I do.

But most of the time when I arrived at the word 'costumes' you saw the eyes of the addressed person already getting clouded over and if the eyes already showed it then you can imagine the fog that entered their brain. Short circuited because unable to process this information on the form you could fill in your personal details. In the box answering the question 'profession' there was only space for 30 letters, and that was already a lot to remember.

Believe me; people like to have it simple. And not only outside art. Also in art. People like to label and like to put things in boxes. So what kind of label they were gonna put on me. Where to categorise this artist. Tearing him apart and putting him in different boxes would take too much space. Too much time also.

People like to have it simple. They don't want to process too many words, they want to label without too much effort of thought and next to that 'hail hail multi-tasking', but, especially in the Protestant culture where I come from; please concentrate on one or two things, because how can you ever be good and professional anyway....

Make choices! If you can't make choices, well, hell and damnation.....

This was already preached to me in art-school. But not because I'm stubborn, and I am stubborn and not because I am obstinate and rebellious, even though I am, It happened otherwise.

Of course that was a choice.

(Hell I made choices, of course you have to make choices, but in this case I decided to do it all. Except photography that is...)

But as person without a label you have a hard time. You do all this different things Peoples personal googles can't find you.

I lost them already on introduction and I went my own way without being labelled. Made myself unable to be tracked...

Freedom. Definitely.

Practical. Not at all

On realising that I put the word 'visual storyteller' on my business-card.

So that is what I am, that is what I do.

And actually I do it all.

It hasn't been like that always. For a short period of time I could be labelled as (just) a video artist.

And before that, but that was around the time of my entrée in art school I labelled myself as a painter. Even though my real dream was to become a movie-director.

So that was before they ripped me apart and I had to piece myself together again. As fits as a short description of my first two years in art school.

Somewhere during that destruction somebody told me that I couldn't paint, so it took me years to dare to touch a paintbrush again.

Which is (may be) either a proof that art school is partly a brainwash launderette or that at least it made me so insecure that I took everything for true while scraping myself from the floor.

In the process of recreating myself I must have spent at least one year pondering about what those art teachers meant by the word concept. Which I at first mistakenly interpreted as deep philosophical thinking. I mistook my head to be the actual breeding-ground for new art works.

Well for some people that might work, but I ended up with some dramatic results as my hands went on strike unwilling to submit to just the dictatorship of my brain-waves.

Then I found a video camera. Actually I bought it. And that camera changed my life.

(How wonderful to exaggerate)

Pretty soon it helped me to clean up the debris that was still littered around me and it taught me a couple of very important lessons which the media I was already quite skill-full in, could have never done anymore.

To be illiterate in a medium enables you to fail. And you can learn hell of lot from accidents. In being unknowing and naif you take risks and in taking risks you either fall or fly. And as an artist I think you always should create for yourself the possibility that these two extremes both might happen.

It enabled me to just do again. To play, to let things happen beyond my control and to let myself go.

So that is one thing I learned: In the future I had to protect myself from perfectionism.

Perfectionism is a trap and that is probably a reason, next to being bored easily, why jump so much between different media. To cultivate imperfections. Even though at the same time I'm a big promoter of craftsmanship.

The most important lesson I learned from playing around with that camera was that I found the pleasure back of creating. The pleasure in making art. Pleasure I lost when I was stuck in my head.

Pleasure I think is the most important ingredient and the condition my art practise has to fulfil.

What I tried to do in this video's was to create special effects without using a computer. So actually trying to create 'real effects' as opposed to the fake effects generated by computers.

That quest to achieve something more real or more honest became a reoccurring thing in my work.

Next to the physical component that I actually want to make everything myself as much as possible.

Where I saw it in this case as a pro that I totally lacked a lot of technical knowledge. Because that forced me, having decided on creating special effects, to use the most basic materials possible. The only technical

equipment was the camera. The rest was ropes, cardboard boxes, duck-tape, and panty-hoses. And myself sometimes. And with that materials I sometimes built whole sculptural installations to create a certain special effect.

I had a lot of fun. I made some video's which are still to be seen on my web-site, and in my development it was an important step I made.

The only problem that i had was that the results really looked like video art, which was very well appreciated by my teachers, but I was personally quite bored with video art at that time.

We talk the year 2000, and I had the feeling that video art hardly changed since the seventies. I felt that there still were a lot of boundaries and limits concerning video art in which narrative for example almost was a taboo. as if some people had decided that video art was a static language. I spoke that language, but I also felt that I wasn't able to say everything that I wanted.

Luckily, and I find that a big step forward video-art made quite a leap in recent years. It's nowadays allowed to look at feature films, to use narrative and there is quite a lot of mutual exchange going on between video-art and cinema, which benefits both, I think.

Incorporating more narrative in my work became a sort of goal which resulted in the installation 'Modern Prometheus' with which I graduated in 2001.

There were 3 video's in this installation, which were shown on Televisions which were installed in big boxes that functioned as semi-walls. By that the video's were made to look like video paintings. Nowadays you would just show the video's on flat-screens, but in 2001 totally beyond my budget. I even still used vcr's because burning a dvd cost over 200 euros at that time.

Next to that video's there were two sculptures.

This sculptures I decide to make after one year of only making video. On one hand of feeling already imprisoned in one medium. Of already being labelled and destined in other people's eyes as that video artist.

Which was reflected in the feedback I got from that the same teacher who told me that I couldn't paint, who came to me after graduation to tell me that she loved my video's but that I should quit making sculptures.

And on the other hand because of this strange phenomenon that I saw happening around me, that upon arriving in the final year most people I studied with seem to get infected by the spell of this upcoming graduation. Suddenly behaving as 'real' finished gallery artists', Totally knowing what that meant, totally forgetting about experimenting, as if playing-time was over and the graduation show was the one and only change on a ticket into the art-world. I don't deny the effect of the spell on me, but I also realised by

reflecting on other peoples behaviour what a luxury and a safe place an art-school actually is. And that I should exploit that fact to the very end, by doing something I never really did before.

The title 'Modern Prometheus' I borrowed from the subtitle of Mary Shelley's book Frankenstein and my aim was to question with this installation the blind believe people have in progress. the works illustrate peoples animalistic side, their vulnerability, fear, lust and violence, which despite technical progress stand in the way of real evolution of the animal called human being.

I'm generally not a real fan of gluing so many explaining words to an artwork. But because for the purpose this being a lecture I do it anyway. In general my personal view is that an art work should be able to stand alone in the world without being accompanied by an explaining text. I think it should give the viewer an opportunity, with the guidance of a title which points in a certain direction, to make up his own story.

Another video that featured in my graduation show was ' Space odyssey' (Space odyssey 2001), which was one of the last video's I made till I started making video's again almost three years ago.

What happened?

My graduation was quite a success. It sort of launched me off and in the succeeding half a year I was really busy in doing all this exhibitions I was asked to be in.

Showing different parts of my installation all over the Netherlands and in Berlin.

But for some reason it didn't satisfy me at all. I pretty soon was overcome by a 'is this what it is' feeling? I didn't like it. It bored me. Over and over again showing the same things. Hardly having time to make new things. And worse: I realised I never really anticipated what it was to be a professional artist or more important what I wanted it to be, and what my actual goal was.

This unease came actually with a big package of guilt.

Having this feeling that I did something wrong, by doing it not quite the way as my teachers in school taught me was the best way of playing the ball-game of art.

I mentioned art school before as partly a brainwash launderette. Which for me is a sort of true, because you are confronted with people who can be quite pushy in communicating what worked for them and their believes, and

sometimes forget that we are talking subjective matter here.

Which is also understandable again as you see art school as an institution that is assigned the task to prepare people to successfully function in the art world. Which means that one hand it's aim is to provide you with words and tools to come as close to yourself as possible and on the other hand to create an awareness of the rules and the context of the playground where art is performed.

A playground that seems, because of the way how people talk about it, full of this forbidden words and labels and rules. Full of to-do's and don'ts

They talked art for me in being that big monster that is made out of all this competitive people with their different interests. This monster, which you are taught to tickle in a certain way to get things done.

But there I was and I very much doubted my tickle-skills.

rationaly I knew that it came down to applying my own tickle technique and that that would work best for me, but it took me some time to empty my luggage of the things that worked out for me to be not useful.

I learned a lot, but there was also a lot of well meant advice, which re-vibrated in the choir of my inner voices which I had to get rid of.

It took time to find my own way, and to go back to my original idea of art is what you make it and to not let myself being corrupted by what I now call art-world as an independent phenomenon standing next to art. Instead of being one and the same thing.

I think it's important to communicate this differentiation, even though you can't deny the mutual influence, of course.

And there this guy labelled as a video-artist kicked his main language-tool the camera in the bottom-drawer of his closet, took his neglected pencils out and assignment himself to make every day a drawing.

At first for the sake of at least doing something. That's how it started.

But pretty soon this drawing thing outgrew the status of just a thing to keep my hands busy. Became more than a reservoir for future ideas or a whip for discipline. It became a project on it's own.

A fragmented self-portrait in which I used and abused the only person in whose head I could look. I became a guy with a butterfly net in a quest for 'more real' and 'more honest', trying to catch and to secure situations,

associations and thoughts which you'd rather erase from your inner hard disc, which you would never express in words, or which are, through the severe selection of your brain and memory, destined to be forgotten. Trying to attempt to come to a complete elimination of self-censorship.

Sweet vulnerageability, a word combining the word rage and vulnerability, is the title of this project which became a sort of an addiction with an end result of over 1200 drawings. People tried to label it as a diary, but I never agreed with that label. Even though it was a daily thing, and the main character was me.

But it had nothing to do with biography. It was far more a journal of flash-thoughts. To fix, out of the enormous amount of thoughts you produce on a day the things that never make it to your memory stick.

A journal of incidents, the side tracks of the main story.

A journal of the results of the cherished ability to still been able to look through totally naif eyes to the world, an ability that enabled me to still be honestly shocked and angry about things.

A journal of jokes of your inner-voice, to stupid to speak out loud, but very funny when drawn.

A self-portrait in 1200 drawings and still you would get only a slight idea of me.

I called it an addiction and as everybody knows most addictions are not very healthy in the long run and they are pretty hard to quit.

So probably a thousand drawings would have been enough. In the end I was repeating myself and I knew it. It became a trick which didn't satisfy me anymore as much as in the beginning. As I said before by becoming to skill-full I totally ruled out the possibility to fail and by that I also erased the pleasure of the daredevil. To stay with the metaphor: the kicks didn't hit that hard anymore. But I was hooked. I couldn't stop. Even though I found my story-line already and I felt totally stuck in this repeating a4 prison I built for myself.

Breaking out this time meant feeling miserable for while. A decision to take some fresh air in Mexico. And by coming to a decision to turn my back on art partly , and find my playground for a while in the margins of art.

This time didn't throw away my tools

I started organising parties. For which I also made the video-visuals.

There were two reasons for doing this. One was that I have been complaining about Amsterdam nightlife for all the years that I had been living there. But complaining is easy, so instead of being a sideline-nagger I decided to show

what my idea of a good party was.

The other reason was that this neglected video-camera in that bottom-drawer kept on making this flirtatious noises every once and while. And having found my content and my themes in my drawings I had this idea in my head to come up with a form in which I could bring the drawings to live . To create a form which translated the content of the drawings into video. To actually bring together all this different media I was working with.

I went to Mexico and I was totally inspired by the traditional masks, pinatas and mojigangas and I saw suddenly a way to accomplish that goal.

And the parties were a place where I could put this to the test.

Getting paid to experiment and going completely wild on materials and new techniques without having to worry about the content. Just totally concentrate on form, which I probably never could have done if the purpose for these video had been an art context.

I definitely wanted to create more than wallpaper, and of course content would always seep in, but by doing it for the purpose of a party I created a freedom for myself to completely let myself go again.

I started to make puppets and costumes. Building stages and props. Was lucky that the blue-screen technique finally was available even if you had no thousands Euros to spend. And I created a sort of video collages in which all the pre-created elements came together.

Work work work, hardly any time to think. Every month a new 40 to 50 minutes video, and I gave myself two weeks to make them. Lots of stress on one hand but I had so much fun in making them. I discovered so many new things also.

They are may be not so deep this video's, but still they fit completely in my work as an investigation of universal image language. We were working with these themes for this parties and according to these themes I tried to catch and fix the moulds and stencils we have in our head. The platonian dictates that are taught to us by art history, Disney and television. A collection of personalised clichés.

As it worked out I was not the only one waiting for a good party and obviously my idea of a good party was shared by far more people, So this whole thing got a bit out of hand and became this hype, which attracted more and more hipsters and people imitating hipsters.

Nice for the revenues of the party but I don't care for hip and see no point in aiming to be hip. Having no clue what hip is except that something's hipness is already over as soon as it is picked up by the media and being described in

magazines.

So I had a reason, next to being bored again and having accomplished two missions on the way, to leave again.

A backpack full of new experiences and ideas to fully concentrate on the fusion of form and content again. A very healthy break for me. Even though in the eyes of some people I had already degenerated to this guy who is doing parties, and who therefore obviously was not to be taken seriously anymore. It's difficult to be in two boxes at the same time. Very confusing.

But even being involved in this party-thing a great deal of my time, I still catered for the art world also.

In between I did a couple of exhibitions.

The title of this exhibition 'Don't trust the balloonner' was something, a sentence my friend in Mexico said to me on arriving, about the guy who was selling balloons, blown up winnie the poohs, tweeties and spongebobs, in the park in front of his house. The balloons were a cover up for the drug business he was actually running.

Balloons colourful objects, blown up images filled with air.

I used this exhibition which took place in a gallery which was at the same time a big showroom window to put on display this prehistoric news image out of my personal history. An image based on the images that were burnt on my inner eye around 1984. Images that started in the little Erik the realisation how schizophrenic the world the world is.

A shopping window full of African Hunger children, while outside masses of people did their Christmas shopping. These Huge drawings were surrounded by other random media images that hunted my head to emphasise my diagnosis of schizophrenia.

But who was the balloonner in this case. May be it was the artist who dared to make this statements in the safety of an art context.

The work with the hunger children I called Mars Attacks, another stolen title, Because while working on this big drawings, this thing crossed my mind all the the time, that they look so much like the way Martians are portrait in lots of films.

The other works were developed by random association, from African children to African Americans, to street-culture, to hip-hop video's and the wonderful world of pimps and bitches which would be labelled as freedom in most western eyes, but can also be seen as degrading, and in the same way

women unfriendly, as the beliefs and values, as according to the propaganda, our contemporary enemy stands for, both promoting submission. Therefore this sculpture is called 'submissionaries' .

And then that was just a short step away from another personal prehistoric image that the eighties burnt in my memory, that of a wide legged Madonna in Jean Paul Gaultier Lingerie, which supposedly stood for modern feminism and girl-power. In which playing the whore is suddenly redefined as a power tool. Which I find at least a really good marketing trick.

I do actually quite like Madonna. But she was nice to turn in a total caricature and to re-locate her from her original MTV context to an art environment, where I was right away accused of being sexist, by two Swedish girls, at which I only could respond, but this is what you see on television all the time, I exaggerated a little, but that's just what I did.

In the beginning of this year I got this opportunity to do this exhibition in this gallery in Amsterdam which was actually big enough to do a little overview of my work from recent years

The title was 'He calls them love handles, I call them flabs' Which I stole out of the mouth of Nicole Kidman, while saying that in Gus van Sants movie 'To die for'

The exhibition was of course was full of puppets and masks, which functioned as

as a sort of lubricant, On one hand to attract people, to let them slide a little bit more easily over the very high threshold of an art-gallery, but also to have a lighter balance for my darker views on the world. Which were more expressed in the selection of drawings I choose for this show

Eventhough I only had 6 weeks in between being asked for the exhibition and the opening, I have this principle that for every exhibition I want to make at least one new work. That's how for this show the work 'Sweet Dreams' was born.

I was hunted by this image of an hanging elephant. At first not knowing why, but I had to make it.

I needed google to find the English expression 'there is an elephant in the room', meaning there is a very obvious problem that is ignored by everyone. Which was an amazing find for me, because if I needed an illustration of the concept behind all my work, a resume then it would be this enormous animal which I was already almost finished. This beast which had to be made, without precisely knowing why.

Because according to me the world is full of elephants, and we human beings have developed a way to look around them.

A sort of magic. Magic that is called language.

In which language is a pair of glasses, a spam-filter that only makes you see what you want to see, opposed to what language also does of course, being our main tool to think about and tell about the world.

Language which gave human being the tool to declare himself an other category than all the other animals. He talked himself by using language into something different and by that became very good at denying it's animalistic side.

Language which gives us the opportunity to label things and to put things in boxes. To categorise things. That's how we understand the world, but that's also how we miss out on a lot of the world. Mostly out of self-protection. Life is easier being partly blind.

I want to take people by their eyes and drag them through their blind spots. I want to be the hacker who switches off that spam filter every now and then.

Here stands for you a guy who calls himself a storyteller, who talks a lot, but at the same time has double feelings about language and words.

Who doesn't like labels and boxes. Who even in a lecture about his work grabs every opportunity to rave against them

So it must come straight from the stomach.

And that is one thing I believe in: the stomach,

Not the underbelly, there brew different emotions, that's where shit is made, but the stomach.

If you manage to get your ear in your stomach I'm quite sure you will know your concept, the concept of your work, I mean, as for me concept is synonymous with what you are all about,

These themes and ideas, these fascinations that always, beyond your control, slip into your work. That is if you manage to lose yourself in your work

Concept for me is a line you can track between and in each work that you make, and that line is, not surprisingly you, the maker of the work. That line is the stuff you are made out of and brought up with. The sum of the blows you received, the blessings you can count and all the boredom in between.