



Puck Verkade interviewed
by curator Elizabeth Neilson,
22 August 2019



Elizabeth Neilson: I would like to talk a bit about your approach to this project. It feels to me that there are a lot of new processes in this work, and also that analogue processes are more visible than digital. What led you to do so many new things?

Puck Verkade: Lots of new processes, yes! I see every new work as an invitation to learn something new and pull myself out of my comfort zone. In recent video works I have kept mainly to the digital domain but for *Plague* I wanted to actively get rid of my longstanding fear of making things with my hands. Fabricating stop-motion puppets, props and film sets, papier-mâché masks and costumes – it’s something I sincerely enjoy so much now and I don’t think there’ll ever be a way back to solely digital for me. Another new element is that I’m composing most of the music and sound effects for *Plague* myself, using an analogue synthesiser and MIDI notation. I’m trying to work that out at the moment – it’s a steep learning curve but it’s pushed me in such an exciting way.

EN: Previously your subject matter was almost occluded by personal and pop references; viewers got an impression but it was not necessarily clearly laid out. Here, we are entering a place where the fantasy allows something to be directly pointed to, but in a more playful way.

PV: My work has become more particular. I’ve moved away from depicting autobiographical footage and started diving into the language of the uncanny and the weird. I feel that the playground of the absurd allows me to dig much deeper into a subject. In recent works like *Bait* (2018) and *Doing Lucy* (2018) I began to introduce my interest in half-truths, speculation and the manipulative impact of images through constructing fictional narratives – bringing together opposing perspectives by collecting found snippets of texts sourced from journalism, soap operas and TV shows,

internet forums, academic lectures and popular science, for instance. I collect it, scramble it and repurpose the words into speculative narratives voiced or embodied by unreliable and conflicting characters. For the first time, I’ve sent all my notes to a ghost-writer who’s helping me to write the story as a spoken word rhyme from the point of view of the housefly. The visual side of things undergoes a similar process. I collate these different aesthetics, resolutions and types of footage on top of one another like a moving collage of parallel worlds. I hope it compels the audience to become aware of the manipulation of the images, and the manipulation that is possible with moving image in general.

EN: So the cartoon reality allows something that is more critical to be proposed by the work?

PV: For *Plague* I have been looking into theories on Jung’s collective conscience and how archetypal images play a strong role in that. There are power imbalances inherent in those constructions that are no longer going unnoticed. For instance, the ‘housewife’ character, marking an outdated trope, is based on a blend of Chantal Akerman’s Jeanne Dielman, Marge Simpson and Donna Reed, and added to by my own fears and anxieties. I was raised by my mother, who suffered from severe agoraphobia. She couldn’t process the concept or experience of the ‘outside world’, which created an obvious psychological and physical separation between realities.

The housewife in *Plague* eventually sees a mirror image of herself who’s pulling her into the TV, breaking down this separation, and it unfolds a parallel reality where she is half-fly and half-human. Perhaps the film speculates that the only way out of this disaster is to hybridise – or, rather, it is a representation of the more harmonious relationship that is needed with nature. In this

respect the housefly plays the role of the trickster, fuelled by the housewife’s conscience, or her depression. It’s like a voice in your head that haunts you with the feeling something’s not right. It draws on active imagination and speculative thinking more than a ‘realistic’ scene would. I feel that the absurd, the cartoon and the uncanny allow me to leave more space for the viewer to make up their own mind, and interpret the work according to their own sensitivities, background and assumptions.

EN: You seem to be drawing out something that is very topical at the moment which is about questioning the canon of Western modernity – the fallacy that ‘nature’ and ‘human’ are different things. Tell me more about solastalgia and the connection between the environment and our psychological state, because I had never heard of it before.

PV: When I started to carry out research for this video, I began by exploring the interior landscape of psychological issues and mental health, but when I heard about solastalgia something clicked. It’s a term coined by environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht that describes a form of mental or existential distress caused by environmental change – a depression caused by climate trauma which is changing our shared habitat. So in the work there are these scales of solastalgia: comparing the Earth, the domestic home and the psyche as interconnected habitats of suffering.

By damaging the Earth we are damaging ourselves, so it’s not surprising that, along with the current urgent ecological breakdown, there is also a looming collective psychological breakdown. It is a holistic understanding; you can’t destroy one and not expect to affect the other.

EN: We have been educated into believing we are not the planet, but we are made of the same fabric, we have the same DNA.

PV: Exactly – we have been separated from nature instead of seeing ourselves as part of it. The green screen sections shift between the interior and exterior realities and reveal images of wildfires, the Arctic melting, plastic waste, food shortages, the collapse of insect ecology. All these climate crisis phenomena have become tropes through media channels, while at the same time climate change is being treated as a fiction. The damage humans have done to the Earth is undeniable. From our anthropocentric point of view, it’s bleak and dystopian to see that human extinction could be pretty near. However, whose dystopia is it? Other ecologies would flourish in our absence. I think that is what compelled me to tell the story from the point of view of the housefly. Usually the housefly is regarded as a domestic pest, an invasive species that plagues our homes. However, compared to the melodramatic housewife, the fly is very articulate. It functions as the messenger between the indoor and outdoor worlds, breaking up the confines of the housewife’s psyche.

EN: Let’s talk about the installation: you have often built environments for your works, but previously they have not so directly re-created the space in the film. But here we are, sitting in a room filled with giant chips.

PV: The idea of being lost in a landscape of chips, for me, was first just slapstick humour combined with the unsettling feeling of being out of touch. In the video the chip scene is where things flip – it’s an existential pivot for the character. The idea of shifting scale becomes a mind trick to evoke sympathy with the fly somehow.

EN: It certainly works on those counts: we are dwarfed by these enormous chips and become the size of a fly. I think it is true to say that we need invertebrates but they don’t need us. If human beings were to disappear tomorrow,

the natural world would likely thrive. But if invertebrates were to disappear, well, I imagine we would be completely sunk.

Image on reverse:
Plague (watercolour), 2019

Installation:
Plague, 2019
Single Channel video installation, colour, sound, cardboard sculptures. Both works courtesy the artist and Dürst Britt & Mayhew, The Hague Netherlands.

The development of *Plague* has been generously supported by Dommering Foundation, Mondriaan Fund and DordtYart and Zabludowicz Collection.

Artist’s presentation: Thursday 10 October, 7pm. Free
Join Laughter Yoga teacher Odette Kurland for a session of guided laughter, breathing exercises and playfulness to help inspire wellbeing and lower stress levels.

Puck Verkade (b. 1987, The Netherlands, lives and works in London) received her BFA from the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague and completed an MFA in Fine Art at Goldsmiths, London in 2017. Her work has been shown internationally at amongst others: Schimmel Projects Dresden Art Centre, Dresden, 2019; Forde, Geneva, 2019; LISTE, Basel, 2018; ARCO Lisboa, Lisbon, 2018; SUNDAY, London, 2017; Berlin Feminist Film Festival, Berlin, 2016 and LOOP, Barcelona, 2015. She was 2017-2018 resident artist at Sarabande: The Lee Alexander McQueen Foundation. Her work *DOING LUCY*, 2019 is available via Daata Editions. She is represented by Dürst Britt & Mayhew, The Hague Netherlands.

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