

Marinus Boezem »

Marinus Boezem in conversation with Steven ten Thije

Marinus Boezem in conversation with Steven ten Thije, 2 October 2009



Marinus Boezem, *photomontage of Beddengoed uit de ramen van het Stedelijk Museum te Amsterdam* (Bed Sheets from the Windows of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam), 1969

Marinus Boezem is a Dutch artist who, according to the catalogue for 'When Attitudes Become Form', 'discover[ed] air as a plastic material' in 1963. He had a solo exhibition, 'Air Environment', at Galerie Swart in Amsterdam in 1968, also sharing an exhibition with Jan Dibbets and Ger van Elk in the same space that same year. All three Dutch artists took part in the international festival 'Arte Povera + Azioni Povere' in Amalfi, Italy, in 1968. For 'Op Losse Schroeven', Boezem showed weather maps, which he prepared daily using information from the Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute, together with a light box displaying the Beaufort Scale and loudspeakers from which the voice of a well-known newscaster could be heard reading the day's weather forecast. One of his weather maps was reproduced on the cover of the exhibition catalogue. He was also represented by *Beddengoed fig.7 uit de ramen van het Stedelijk Museum te Amsterdam* (Bed Sheets from the Windows of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, 1969). For 'When Attitudes Become Form', Boezem's *Windows* (1968), again involving bed sheets, was installed in a school near the Kunsthalle Bern.

Steven ten Thije: To begin the conversation, can I ask you to give an impression of your situation preceding 'Op Losse Schroeven'?

Marinus Boezem: My specific situation was quite lonely, in comparison with other artists'. Intellectually I felt connected to Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni – those were the people who inspired me most. In those days I was busy reshaping my artistic practice. This expressed itself in many childish things: I didn't want to smell of turpentine and I didn't want to look like a traditional artist either. However, that was all on the surface. More fundamentally, I tried to conceive of art as freedom. That was a sentiment that has always been strong in me. It was also important to me that the personal be introduced into the work – and by personal I mean physical persona. The artist as body. The artist as responsible for what he does. Exposed.

ST: Where was your body based at the time?

MB: My body was in Schoonrewoerd, a small village close to the town where I was born – Leerdam. My wife and I had just married and we were living in a small house built for workers. I put a sign in front of the house, because I wanted it to have the appearance of a commercial firm. The sign read, in beautiful letters: 'Air Objects', which is how I referred to my work at the time. This sign was made of Perspex, which was very modern for that time. It was then that I met Ger van Elk, who was in touch with Piero Gilardi and [Jan] Dibbets. They were important to me – for the exchange of ideas and in making exhibitions. Gilardi was travelling the world to track down avant-garde movements in art and he came with stories and images that were fascinating. He told me about [Bruce] Nauman, but also about Andy Warhol and his Factory – also based on the idea of a firm: not the romantic artist alone, wound up inside; no, it was work, thinking! I was always interested in the possibility of an immaterial art – in the idea that one could 'tell' an artwork. And by that I don't mean a narrative work but the notion that one's physical presence in front of the work was no longer necessary. You could take the works with you in your head. After Richard Long a walk is no longer the same, just as one might say that the weather forecast is no longer the same after Boezem's weather forecast. Or think of [Joseph] Beuys, when he made a sound piece, on an open-reel recorder: you enter an empty room and the only thing you hear is 'ja, ja, ja, ja', a short silence, and 'nee, nee, nee, nee, nee'. Affirmation and denial as the only presence in the gallery space; that's fantastic! As a dialectical statement, it's so beautiful. To carry a work like that, simply in your head – I thought it was a remarkable achievement.

ST: When did you meet Gilardi?

MB: I don't know the exact date but it must have been 1964 or 1965. We stayed in touch after that – writing to each other, for instance. It was Gilardi who made minds ready for 'Op Losse Schroeven' in the Netherlands.

ST: So you met before the exhibition of Gilardi's work at Galerie Mickery in Loenersloot in 1967?

MB: I saw that show, so it must have been before that. At the time he was working in Warhol's Factory. The remarkable thing was that Gilardi connected up an entire artistic movement in a completely altruistic way. That was a new phenomenon, because artists normally are very self-centred, with big egos, and working together is not so easy. And here collaboration on the basis of ideology was clearly important: Gilardi's political commitment was quite prominent; he was strongly orientated towards the left – even communist – side. You have to realise that at that time in Italy anybody who was anything intellectually was a communist.

Maria-Rosa Boezem: He was travelling with Tommaso Trini, an art critic. Gilardi and Trini were travelling together and also talked with us together.

ST: So you knew Gilardi, Ger van Elk and Jan Dibbets, and then, at a certain moment, Wim Beeren entered the scene from The Hague, where he had been working at the Gemeentemuseum before taking up his role at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. How did you get in touch?

MB: The relationship between Beeren, van Elk and Dibbets was simply a result of them being based in Amsterdam. I joined because Beeren came to my village of Schoonrewoerd and I showed him photographs from Italy of Mario Merz, [Pier Paolo] Calzolari, [Michelangelo] Pistoletto and others who were involved with Arte Povera. Beeren had never seen those works and didn't even know they existed. So, I contacted Gilardi and told him to get in touch with Beeren. That was how we were doing things – we did have some strategy.

However, the discussions that I had with Beeren also contributed to the exhibition actually taking place. My understanding of the developments in the avant-garde of those days had a European base. My background, as I said, was in Klein and Manzoni. Those were my heroes; people who gave a certain twist to being an artist. And this was something that I recognised as being at an even more developed stage in the new movements. I discussed this with Beeren, who also found in the European perspective a logical foundation for the recent developments. In contrast, Edy de Wilde [Director of the Stedelijk Museum] didn't see it, and had difficulties with the exhibition – initially he didn't really want it to happen.

ST: What would you say was the problem for de Wilde?

MB: The immateriality, the absence of style. You shouldn't forget that at that time exhibitions and artworks were judged primarily in terms of style. And a style was always related to a previous style, only one step further. But on this occasion de Wilde, who never was a great fan of sculpture, was confronted with a heap of coal with a Belgian flag on it, made by [Marcel] Broodthaers, which intended to ridicule the Belgian nation. That was something new. Or [Jannis] Kounellis with his scorched materials. The strangest materials could be brought in. At a certain stage Beeren even asked me to eat with de Wilde in a restaurant opposite the Stedelijk Museum, giving me the assignment of presenting the intellectual background to the work. He asked me to 'give it my very best shot'. Well, it happened. I don't remember what I said, but I do remember eating well!

ST: And this was shortly before the show?

MB: This must have been half a year before the show. At the end the exhibition was produced under extreme stress as all of us who had been doing our own thing in our studios, producing new work, now had to prove our worth in a museum setting. Suddenly we felt the pressure of entering a domain of heroes. That made people very uncomfortable and stressed, which resulted in fights and people actually walking away, and others following them to convince them to come back.

ST: How did you – Dibbets and van Elk and you – decide to show your work in a museum?

MB: Well, it was a matter of convincing Beeren to take us seriously, and he was someone who liked to debate and was a good listener. He was really interested in what we did, even if he didn't have much support within the museum – except from his colleagues Coosje van Bruggen and Rini Dippel.

ST: But why a museum show? Why not make an exhibition somewhere else?

MB: Yes, I admit it was a bit of a contradiction. On the one hand we yelled: down with the museum! Well, maybe not that loud. In any case, we wanted to create new platforms for this type of art. On the other hand, we were extremely eager to get into the museum. That was conflictive. And it was a discrepancy that only grew after the exhibition in Bern. The exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum still had an honest background and was carried by the integrity of the organising institution – the museum, its people. This was felt in the way the exhibition was talked about. But seven days later, in Bern, suddenly all the [commercial] galleries were there, and we thought that was very strange. Suddenly it was galleries here and galleries there. And at that point the temptation to connect to a gallery became very strong for many artists. I remember that someone at the opening in Bern said to me: 'You see, eventually you will place your work in a passe-partout as well.' Which meant: sell it. In Bern, the galleries had quite a big influence: the biggest name got the biggest room. In Amsterdam it worked differently.

Just to give some context. Ger van Elk and I once came up with a different name for this type of art: 'unsellable art' (English in original). And we really meant it. Often we didn't make a photograph of the work, it was just put out with the trash, because we thought that we would live forever. If you needed a work, we would just make a new one.

The Bern exhibition was made in no time at all. A few months before we were in the city for another exhibition at the kunsthalle – 'Junge Kunst aus Holland' ['Recent Art from Holland', 2 November–1 December 1968]. I was there earlier than the rest, because I wanted to make an installation with fire and smoke. So I had time to talk to Harald Szeemann and I asked what he was planning to do. He mentioned a grant he had received from Philip Morris – 300,000 Swiss francs to make an exhibition – and he asked me about the exhibition project I was involved in, which he had heard about. Then I started to explain the show to him, without any preconception of what he might do. I told him about [Gilberto] Zorio, [Richard] Serra and others, I even had some material with me. He then decided that this project was more interesting than the show on kinetic art that he was planning at the time. So he completely turned around and started to make a new show – 'When Attitudes Become Form'. After that he came to the Netherlands and we travelled together to Antwerp so I could introduce him to the gallerist Anny de Decker [from Wide White Space gallery], who showed him the work of Panemarenko and all her other artists. He was really impressed. In Amsterdam he then made the deal with Beeren.

ST: And how did Beeren respond to the fact that you had more or less given Szeemann his concept?

MB: I didn't really think about it. I wasn't interested in competition between museums. I was interested in presenting my work, or the work of those people I thought worthwhile. And I never imagined that Szeemann would change his plan so radically. I thought he might realise it in a year or two, not in a month.

ST: And did you introduce him to Gilardi as well?

MB: Not that I remember. He did speak to Ger van Elk, who was very generous in giving information and establishing relationships. Van Elk was on the West Coast quite often, as his father lived in Los Angeles, and he knew the art scene there.

ST: This brings us to the presence of artists from the US. If you look at the preparations for the two exhibitions, it looks as though Beeren started his journey in Europe – Italy, to be precise – whereas Szeemann immediately took a plane to the US. How was the relationship between the European and North American artists? Were they really different camps?

MB: For me it was a different story. I even wrote a letter about it to Rudi Fuchs at a certain moment. What irritated me was that a true development was taking place, rooted in a European tradition, like Zero. This was a very influential movement. People like Armando, Yves Klein, [Daniel] Spoerri, [Lucio] Fontana and so on. I know it sounds very banal but in those days everything had to come from the US. Not only jeans came from there, but also the big ideas, big business. Everything was big there. For instance, many artists in the US had assistants – even if they didn't have work for them, they still had them. That was quite intimidating. I thought that what the North Americans did in the show was much more a result of Minimal art. For instance, even if Robert Morris's felt sculptures seemed close to what we did, they still had a very different background.

ST: Was this difference also discussed while working on the show?

MB: Yes, we spoke a lot about it with Beeren.

ST: What was his perspective?

MB: European, I think. But I think he was also intimidated by the Bern approach, with its focus on galleries, while he was more oriented towards artists. For instance, he would come to us and say: 'Wim T. Schippers, does he belong in the show or not?' And then we started to think about it, for we wanted to keep the exhibition as pure as possible, based on just one foundation. There are always some things happening that are related, which you have to allow in or not – all of this is part of our Dutch Reformed Church mindset. That's how we came up with the compromise of the artists' pages in the back of the catalogue. There we presented work that was related to the show but not truly part of it. Typically Dutch Reformed Church.

ST: Could you now tell me something about the build-up to the opening of 'Op Losse Schroeven'? Were you working day and night in the museum?

MB: Yes, and not only that. People had such different views and ideas. Halfway through someone would think of a new idea. Everyone came with a few different proposals, from which they chose one at the last moment. But it all was so democratic that nobody would interfere, not Beeren or anybody else. In a way, everything was possible. My own work involved opening up all the windows of the museum a little bit, so that one could hang out a pillow and a sheet. That created a lot of problems for the climate control in the rooms and for the insurance. Then there was the issue of sockets.

There were far too few in each room for this new type of work, as when the power supply was installed in the building nobody thought one would have artworks with a plug.

We artists became very nervous as the opening date came closer, since now we really had to do it. At that time the Stedelijk had a gigantic reputation. You can't imagine it now, but the Stedelijk was a museum with a global influence – if you had a show there, you were someone. With that in mind, think of all the humiliating gestures that we directed towards it: think of Dibbets's contribution to the exhibition, which involved digging holes to expose the foundations of the museum [Museum Pedestal with 4 Angles of 90o (1969)]. I thought the fact that Beeren allowed all that was quite impressive. For me he was the new curator.

ST: More than Szeemann?

MB: For me it was Beeren. The only pity was that Beeren never obtained the kind of power that Szeemann did. I thought his approach was the real innovation, for he gave all the power to the artists, and let them do whatever they wanted to do.

ST: Could you describe the differences between Szeemann's and Beeren's approaches?

MB: I think Szeemann was more intuitive, impulsive. He decided something was interesting and went for it. Beeren was more committed to artists and he gave himself more time to work things out. I think he was interested in the philosophical aspect of the work, not so much in the material or physical aspect. A conceptual art – that is what he was looking for. And, now that I think of it, I believe Beeren also had religious ambitions.

Translated by Steven ten Thije