



MARJAN TEEUWEN

I am an artist

STEVE MILLER: *So Marjan, your work is compellingly beautiful, and brings up a myriad of issues relating to culture in our shifting global political climate. This issue of Musée is about power, and the press release for your exhibition at Silverstein Gallery states that your images illuminate the precarious balance of the power of destruction with the constructive implications of order and function.*

MARJAN TEEUWEN: My work deals with the polarity between the constructive and the destructive forces of mankind. People are very good at building up the world. We can build cities, we can go to the moon, but at the same time, we risk destroying our world. I often quote Dostoevesky, who believed that people couldn’t overcome that polarity. That’s the big important theme in my work, standing up & falling down, chaos, and order. Sometimes, I lean a little bit more to the side of destruction, falling down... but you can feel both always.

STEVE: *Yes, that’s interesting.*

MARJAN: I never relate directly to critics... I’m not a politician, I’m not a journalist, I’m not a social worker, I’m an artist. So I use artistic language, not an activist language, not a political language. Imagination is still the most important, but now it’s working in the context of a country.

STEVE: *So you mentioned the power of destruction, and I saw that the spaces that you chose were valuable as a result of powerful destruction, of the war, or of the global forces of real estate development, and the displacement that that created.*

MARJAN: But you can see two sides. Social housing companies would demolish a flat, or a whole complex of two hundred apartments, and their goal was to realize new housing. And you can put that out positively or negatively. In Holland, it meant the end of an era of social housing thinking. Now, the real estate companies have more power, and they don’t care much anymore about the social conditions of people. They want to earn more money. But it’s never directly political, it’s all in between. For example, the installation Rotterdam is known because of its heavy bombardment during the Second World War. They were the most severely hidden city in Poland. That installation was just a long street of two level apartments. When visitors came, many of them were people who’d experienced a second world war, and it scared them. There are many minority groups in the south further down where I worked, and they were reminded of earthquakes. People who’d experienced the war only saw chaos, falling down, and destruction. And other people only saw the beauty of new spaces. First, you see what’s in your mind, and then you see all the other sides. Rotterdam was the most ordered installation in my eyes. It was much, much more ordered than for

Portrait by Andrea Blanch.



example Leiden, or Mondriaanstraat, where the destruction was much much heavier. Rotterdam had aesthetics in it, but you could still always feel the destruction. For everybody it's different.

STEVE: *You embody in your work, more than any work I know, this dialectic between order and chaos; creation and destruction; dissection and reconstruction. In a way you are an aesthetic surgical strike force. So, how do you physically dissect a space?*

MARJAN: The first building I found by myself, and all the others, social housing companies came to me and asked "Are you willing to realize an installation in our flat complex?" In Russia, it was a wooden construction, in an old wooden house, a hundred years old about. And, three times I worked in concrete buildings, which are very different, but I loved the challenge of coming into a new kind of building to see the possibilities. In Leiden, I had four buildings, and two houses. Two were from 1611, and the other two were 100 years old, so there were a lot of new possibilities; every building has special qualities.

STEVE: *So your final project for every installation is a photo, the documentation. Do you have any idea what the photo will look like when you start going into a space, when you begin the process of demolition and reorganization?*

MARJAN: The installation has two goals. There's the architectural installation, as an object, as an environment, where people can come in. For example, in Leiden, 4,000 visitors were there during about three months. That installation is one specific goal I want to realize; it is very different from watching a film, and in equal importance for me, is realizing the photos. Mostly, I have one rough sketch, but it's clear like you saw in Mondriaanstraat what it's like, one circle and one triangle, and it's very simple. "Then I need three floors, cut here, cut here." I'm not worried about details or, how many meters, I think about depth and height, but it's not detailed.

STEVE: *I saw the eye beam that went into the Lunhouse, and it looked like a powerful intervention.*

MARJAN: Thanks to my contractor. He is very careful, he measures it all. He is responsible for the safety of the building. I make the sketch, of course, and then I have the meetings with the contractor and the constructor, then the constructor makes a very detailed report, and then the local government has to ap-

Marjan Teeuwen, *Destroyed House Piet Mondriaanstraat 1*, 2011.

prove it. And it's not simple, it takes months. The contractor and I have a very good relationship. He's done four, five installations with me, and then I show him this sketch, and then we talk about it. They calculate how much steel we need, and for an average installation it's something like 10 tons, sometimes as much as 12. A lot has to be done very carefully. They're the professionals, I'm only the artistic eye. But I'm there all the time with them, so I can monitor them, and I can direct them.

STEVE: *So you have a final image in your head...*

MARJAN: Yes, one or two. From certain sides, and that's my starting point. I can't change the construction possibilities. But all the time, in the process, I see new perspectives, I see new views, and I react immediately to that. We can put it a little bit lower, we can take the other floor as well, that kind of thing. I can never imagine how it looks on that side, or from that side, or straight, and when I see it in the process, I say, "oh, if I want to do more from this position, I need that."

STEVE: *So, you started out as a painter, and it sounds like this is like the process of painting.*

MARJAN: But sculptures also work like that. When a sculptor makes a sculpture, he looks around and says things like "It has to have more height, it has to be transparent" or "it has to be more dense." The difference is that I don't just take a piece of wood or clay or steel, I take a whole building. That's the difference, but the creative process is just the same.

STEVE: *So for me what's interesting about the video, and about the destroyed houses in Lieden, is both the enormous scale of this particular project and the time it took to build it. In the photos, I get more transfixed by the image. How important is it for the audience to relate to the time it takes, to the scale of your ambition? How long do you let people experience the physical space? For Lieden's, I think you said, three months. But, when you look at the photograph, you can't imagine. So the photograph, it becomes a practice of conceptual art. Do you see it that way?*

MARJAN: Yes, that's why I pointed out that the experience of walking through an installation is so different from the experience of looking at a photo. The dimensional aspect makes it so different, in the installation. You can smell, see, feel the dust, you can feel the heaviness of the floors. It's more simply made, more abstract. But it's not that an installation has more quality than a photo, they're just very different. In my eyes, the photos are more sublimated. For example, in the installation you can be distracted by all the things on the floor by walking. But the photo gets one image that long after dwells in your eyes.

STEVE: *So I totally understand your need to keep the focus on the healing aspects, and on the powerful aspects of how art can bring people together. But, one can't ignore that this house is a physical manifestation of a destroyed building that's the result of a society torn apart by war, and the political consequences of politics in the Middle East. So, when I looked at the photograph when I was at Silverstein and I saw a column that you made, I projected it as a column of hope. So, I can't separate the politics. And with Leiden, the politics for me was that cultural institutions need to expand. And the other question raised was real estate forces.*

MARJAN: It was the end of an era in Holland, of social housing, and a social way of thinking. We care for everybody, including people who don't earn that much money, so that's always there in social context as well. But never as obvious as in Gaza. And I totally agree, it was an artistic intervention, in an extremely hidden country. One professor who wrote about my work and visited me in Gaza explained it as the that the political context finished the work's meaning.

STEVE: *What was the environment of the audience? Obviously not many people go to Gaza specifically for your art, so it was really for Gaza.*

MARJAN: It was. And when I came there the first time, I just wanted to examine whether a Western

Marjan Teeuwen, *Destroyed House 1*, 2007.



woman could come there and create a piece of work in a demolished bombed house. Whether the people would want me there. And then I gave a lecture to about 80 people, many women, and it was clear that it wasn't even a question for them, that I had to come. Their answer was that they needed art to heal. And the director, of the Palestinian representation society who I worked with, appreciated art so much. He supported me by sending me cabs, or guys from the Red Cross, to help me search for buildings. I was looking for an artistically bombed building, I thought. And after three days, we couldn't find that many buildings anymore, a lot were already cleaned, and he said, so you need a fresh bombed building. He had a lot of humor and he valued art that much. One last sentence, my technical assistant, for three months, he was very challenged to work with me.

STEVE: *The young man in the video.*

MARJAN: Yes, there are two. Achmed is the younger and Mohammad is about 50 years old. He lost 7 kilos because he was that challenged. And at the end, writers came unexpectedly, the whole world's press, CNN, BBC, France, Albumin, China, everything. So Mohammad became my personal assistant. He talked about his experiences, and his last sentence was, "Now the whole world can see that we Palestinians love art". He didn't say "now the whole world can see how miserable we are. No, no, the whole world can see that we Palestinians love art." I couldn't say it better than that. And it touches me every day, every time. The last part of it... we are recording the demolition... and you see me yelling, laughing, that's my reaction, and then everything, 3 months preparation, 5 months work, 3 months visitors, it's all finished.

STEVE: *So art is often about the power of the transformation of materials into images, transform-*



Marjan Teeuwen, Above: *Archive 6*, 2012; Following spread: *Destroyed House Krasnoyarsk 1*, 2010.

ing the consciousness of the viewer. What are your thoughts on this?

MARJAN: I guess, for myself, it's a personal transformation. When I realize a new project, it's not about the results, it's just a challenge in myself. A need in myself. When it is realized, then I have to see if I'm happy, if I succeeded. And then that's also for the viewers, that's the quality art has, of showing new perspectives on things we all know. Art triggers new ways of looking, new manners of experiencing. We all know such a building, we've lived in such a building our whole life, but in taking away floors, walls, etcetera, I create new perspectives, and suddenly it isn't that safe anymore. Others can relate it to their own lives, or the social time we live in, but also to art history, or the history of architecture. It's all in it, it's all layered, a lot of meaning. In a society, we need art, and literature, and good architecture, because it brings people new perspectives. It can bring beauty, it can bring new meanings, new content. When we took the taxi to come here we saw the 9/11 memorial. And I was very touched by it, it's very well done, but then I saw all the surrounding buildings around with all the plastic walls and shields. I turned around and I said to my husband that all architecture needs to be responsible for the public space, and to create buildings which are really beautiful, that really trigger you. In what sense, it doesn't matter, beauty, or meaning, or something else, but when you have to look at it every day, what a pleasure it is, when it's a beautiful building and not another plastic shield building. It's a responsibility for architects and real estate companies, but they're not interested in that.

STEVE: *So I think we're gonna call that a wrap but I'm gonna give you a bonus question. Is there a question that you always wanted someone to ask and they've never asked you, or something you feel you've been very articulate about that gets left out of discourse about your work?*

MARJAN: No, I don't think so. Sometimes I've been asked questions I don't want to answer, like when they ask for more personal needs why I'm doing this work. Especially after Gaza, and also because of the time we live in, I still feel that social context and need. In an illustrative way, what I said about the architects, is also about artists and also about a society. We need thinkers, because the value of culture is very big.

