



A REVIEW OF KAREL VERHOEVEN'S "SCENES (COUR JARDIN)": AN OPEN INVITATION TO PLAY

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Jakob Van den Broucke (°1993, Ghent) was trained as a sociologist and now focuses on photography and writing. Concepts, methods, language games and contexts provide him with the starting points for new projects. As such Jakob explores and develops processes and methods for understanding daily complexity in order to create meaningful objects. As a result, books (for instance *De mentaliteit is van plastic*), autonomous and serial works, installations and speeches are thrown towards the public sphere.

Abstract: This is a review of "Scenes (cour jardin)," an ongoing project series by Belgian visual artist and designer Karel Verhoeven. The series consists of different architectural sculptures that are placed in (semi)public spaces. This review evaluates the project in terms of its relevancy for socially engaged artistic practice, and the more fundamental questions it raises: What can be learned from situations created by art in public space? How does an observation guide artistic practice? Is it hypothetically possible to assume that the essence of the work of art is not in its appearance, but in how the work is used? What are interesting opportunities for collaborations between artists and social scholars?

Keywords: socially engaged art; public space; objects; playful design

In 2015, Belgian visual artist and designer Karel Verhoeven (°1982, Ghent) realized the first setup of the series “Scenes (cour jardin)”: five white modules made of wood, each incorporating staircases ranging from two to six steps. This review will focus on the ongoing project series “Scenes (cour jardin)” which has travelled across Belgium ever since.



Figure 1. Scenes (cour jardin) 2015

In its first round of production, “Scenes (cour jardin)” was temporarily installed in three different locations: a city square (Fig. 1), a primary school playground and a public park. In each location the modules were arranged in a different constellation or “scene.” A second setup of “Scenes” was created for, and temporarily installed at, a music festival on a public square in the city centre of Ghent, Belgium (Fig. 2). The installation contained five differently shaped modules made of various types of wood, and had three different colors. For the occasion, the artist invited jazz musicians to perform musical interventions amidst the installation throughout the course of the festival. A third, more permanent version of “Scenes” was created for a public cemetery (Fig. 3). Borne out of the lack of open space in the neighborhood where the cemetery is located, the city decided to transform part of the cemetery into a public park. Starting from this incentive, Verhoeven built twelve modules: ten of them have staircases and two are more chair-like pieces, made of inox, pigmented concrete and padouk hardwood. In 2017, the fourth and latest installation of “Scenes” was realized in the form of nine permanent architectural sculptures commissioned for a residential care centre in Poperinge, Belgium (Fig. 4). The modules were made of wood and inox and include a stove and a block game. Based on the environment of the centre, historical walking trails running through the domain and collaborative design practices with the inhabitants, these “Scenes” are part of a longer-term art integration project.



Figure 2. Scenes (cour) 2016



Figure 3. Scenes (jardin) 2016



Figure 4. Scenes (jardin) Poperinge 2017

Different versions of “Scenes” exist, and each new production includes more modules that become more diverse in nature. For every new assignment, the design concept is adapted to the spatial environment proposed by the commissioner; what existed before is appropriated and extended to function in the new environment. All installations were placed in (semi)public spaces, inviting citizens into playful engagement with the installation. Some of Verhoeven’s “Scenes” are permanent, some were temporary. The modules are grafted onto architectural materials and typologies we find in our shared daily environment such as blocks, stairways, seats, benches, tribunes, platforms, stages and pedestals. By playing with level differences, the modules connect the earthly with the unearthly, and are a way of both framing and carrying the spatiality of a place. Throughout the process of making “Scenes” Verhoeven has had to balance the projects’ autonomous aesthetic qualities and their functionalities. The variable use of materials is of course informed by technical, financial, site-specific and other practical realities, but also presents an opportunity for the artist to experiment with and learn about the relationship between form, material and environment.

A first important aspect of “Scenes” I want to bring forth is that by installing a sculptural scenography the artist aims to create *a situation* rather than an installation; not just an object for the viewer to look at, but a temporary point and place in time wherein something can happen. Inspired by the observation that public space is often considered a sterile, passive and empty space, “Scenes” aims to activate (people in) these places and provides temporary places to play, to act and to look. On some occasions the artist takes

control of what happens. For example, when musicians or performers are invited to the installation, it is the artist who curates and stimulates other artists to interact with the situation. During the music festival in Ghent, the musicians played in, above and around the “Scenes” using them as a stage, device and instrument, playing with distances and acoustics of the sculptures and the environment. However, on most occasions a “Scene” gets installed and the work of the artist as “maker” is done, and his power to control is over. The installation itself becomes an agent of expression and the viewer is indispensable for the works’ completion. The viewer is left without an instruction manual and gets confronted with a scenery of objects, objects with seemingly familiar esthetics and functions. What are the objects for? Am I allowed to touch them? How am I supposed to behave? Ambiguity arises and the range of possible interactions between the public and the objects is infinite: children climb and hide in them, tourists take pictures standing on top of them, business men eat their lunch while sitting on them or people just pass by. By creating a “Scene,” the artist formulates an open invitation, an obstacle, for the viewer to play and display, to interact with, to encounter another, to see the surroundings from a different perspective, and as such to explore and direct the situation.

The choice of location and context of where the situation is created is a second important aspect of “Scenes,” as the interaction between object and viewer is highly influenced by context. When the work is installed in a well-defined context, we assume that people will be more inclined to engage with the above-mentioned questions or to question the objects as art objects, and behave accordingly. More often, “Scenes” is placed in a non-traditional art context, in public space, a space where random dwellers are possibly confronted with a “Scene.” When installed on a public square the objects will not necessarily be conceived of as art objects and therefore may invite a more spontaneous response from the public. This creates an interesting tension for those involved in socially engaged artistic practice. Art in public space is instilled with the specific aura of being art. This is, for instance, the case with statues placed on high pedestals, or the classic roundabout art one sees in the streets. These clearly are art objects. A natural reflex of the casual passer-by, therefore, could be: one does not mess with artworks. This would be counterproductive if the intention of the installation was to invite people in. A project like “Scenes,” however, creates a doubt in the random dweller. “Scenes” is in essence an artistic product. However, it comes with a certain functionality as well, for example, the possibility to climb, to sit, to hide. The art objects balance between the functional and the autonomous, the common and the less common. If we give up the idea that something needs to be perceived as art, we might induce more spontaneous and playful interactions. In addition, the context of where it is placed has an impact on people’s perceptions for what the art can be used.

A third interesting aspect of “Scenes” revolves around the impact and evaluation of the work. After the phase of the artist as “maker,” the artist becomes an observer of his own work. Given that the public is invited to touch, enter and experience the work, the traditional division of roles is turned; the spectator becomes the performer and the artist takes the role

of observer. For understanding this aspect of “Scenes,” the preferred type of documentation Verhoeven engages with serves as insightful. For instance, the first installation of “Scenes” on a public square in Brussels is documented through a video montage¹. The documentation does not solely show the work, but focuses on the interaction between objects and viewers. As such, the artist uses video as one way to observe human behavior. The different potential interactions are visualized; the viewer activates meaning, and by way of documentation the artist as observer tries to entangle this production of meaning. It provides an answer to different types of questions: Who engages? Who does not? What can I improve for the non-engagers to consider interaction? What role does the context play if I compare data across different settings? The scholarly importance of this work is that it sparks an interest in more fundamental questions to consider: How does an observation guide artistic practice? What can be learned from socially engaged artistic practice about human behavior in the public sphere? Is it hypothetically possible to assume that the essence of the work of art is not in its appearance, but in how the work is used? “Scenes” offers reasons to consider the many ways we perform physically in daily life, and how our habits, movements and emotions are exposed when we interact with art in public space.

When evaluating “Scenes” in terms of socially engaged artistic practice, the triptych of aspects discussed here leads to three guiding conditions. “Scenes” offers situations: the viewer not just looks at the modules, but is invited to handle. The invitation for interaction is crucial; the artist looks for dialogue and opens up space for social interaction to happen. This “happening” is linked to the second condition, the context of installation. Each “Scene” is fittingly and deliberately placed in a (semi)public space and the choice of outside locations makes for a wide and diverse potential of viewers. The modules are too strange to be “good design” and too functional to be “good art,” though they are ultimately both. So, the question if “Scenes” is art or not becomes irrelevant. Since there is no “art” context, only pedestal-like objects are leftover, and as such, situations in public space are created. A relevant question is: what can be learned from these situations? Thirdly, the investigative approach of the artist, the importance of evaluation, learning and improvement throughout the series is a crucial aspect. The investigation starts during the preparation: what is the history, the typology of the environment, and how do people interact with the existing environment? What is missing, and is an intervention desirable? A modest approach, taking into account what is already there and what could be emphasized, characterizes Verhoeven’s practice. For example, the observation that kids love to put their legs through holes, has been acted upon in a few modules. Or, the observation that elderly people perceive the modules as opportunities for a shared coffee moment led the artist to add a stove and block game to the installation in Poperinge. These examples attest to the use of participatory trajectories that enable interesting learning opportunities during the production process. In the preparatory phase, the artist also uses video for his research. For the first “Scenes” on the school playground a video montage shows children playing on their school playground².

Both in terms of preparation and documentation, Verhoeven's use of video opens up interesting opportunities for further research. A collaboration with social scientists or methodologists might produce added value in this regard: for data production and analysis, or in measuring the impact of the work. For now, the videos are solely observational, and the analysis is not explicit. What if the artist were to create the situation, and collaborate with a researcher to use this situation for data gathering and analysis? As such, information to improve the work could be generated, but findings could also be generated about the tension between humans and material, or about more general aspects of social binding among humans. One could think of "Scenes" as an experimental setup, wherein different contexts and different constellations could be explored in order to analyze aspects of an intuitive approach, of danger, risk or behavior in a public space. In this sense, the artist can improve his practice and progress in working with material and form, building newer modules, evolving the project with an open ending that might invite scholars in at unexpected moments in time. In the end, the meaning of "Scenes" is in its use, and for all we know it is "meaning" that both social scientists and artists are after.

REFERENCES

Verhoeven, K. (n. d.). [Artist's website.] Retrieved from <https://www.karelverhoeven.be/>

ENDNOTES

¹ <https://vimeo.com/129770882>

² <https://vimeo.com/130761126>