

You [just] saw the work of Benjamin Verdonck. An artist who has been inspiring me for years. His continual search for direct and immediate communication with his audience leads him to explore new territories, just as this video shows.

In so doing, he makes use of history, particularly that of the first half of the 20th century. Benjamin Verdonck bridges the rift in the development of the arts that was caused by the Second World War. He is maker, deviser and performer with an organisation and team around him. He is present from beginning to end in the making of the artwork, and for every development, as motor, pusher, master and craftsman .

In my opinion, Benjamin is a visual composer.

He is an artist who makes use of the techniques of composition.

He is aware of that himself, but doesn't place too much emphasis on it: he only studied drama, not composition, and knows little about the techniques of composition for an Ensemble, for example.

What he does do, is listen. A great deal of listening. And singing, a great deal of singing. Searching for music, new or old music.

He is always researching and that affects me. I heard him make music from the beginning, he was like a bird flying above the noise of the traffic and the other sounds of the city beneath him.

After a day of watching [him], I realised that the week is made up light and heavy beats; you could say, light and heavy days. There was clearly a relationship between the structure of the week and the tempo in which he divided his daily performances. He made his nest at a height where the structure really generated another [kind of] spatial experience. The structure suddenly consisted out of a short and a long piece:

The disaster that is always in his work, the failure of the attempt to succeed is deliberately set low on the ground, the groan of the ominous bass'.

The beautiful disappearance, death, the nothingness, is given a place high in the air, or like here, the nest is suddenly empty and a few feathers float high above the nest whilst we hear the violins softly singing.

Verdonck's work is an interweaving of compositional techniques conveyed on the various matrixes intrinsic to music theatre.

Image and sound are so thoroughly composed that movements, both vertically and horizontally, follow each other as a matter of course. He composes space, movement, sound, tempo and harmony in every possible aspect of the work.

His productions – inspired by Joseph Beuys, he once lived with a pig for three days – are never finished works; can never be completely finished. They take place publicly. He composes during the performance, reacting to the circumstances, the fortuities, unique to public places.

It may seem strange but his life with the pig, a performance in which he wanted to show that the media spends more time on the superficial aspects of an issue than on the substance, was a contrapuntal event which he closely followed and which, although it sounds unlikely, was also eventually followed by the pig.

It is strange to see that this direct reaction never leads to the discontinuation of the work.

Although Benjamin reacts to stimuli in his surroundings, he always manages to maintain a

distance so that the art, his work, continues and doesn't succumb to populism despite the interaction with his audience.

There is always a completely composed work, including introduction, development and coda. Everything is planned and arranged in the time, the repetition, the consolidation, the increase in tempo and in the crescendo.

For me, music theatre is not about the composition of a score for an instrumental ensemble. It consists of a number of necessary aspects besides the instrumental ensemble, such as space, performers, music, sound, language, costumes and smell. It is the art of allowing the uniqueness of all these aspects to work as a sort of wavelength, so that a matrix is created in which you can compose. It is about making the fullest use of the possibilities of every element in the performance so that they can be employed as equal aspects of a complete set of instruments.

A distinction is often made between opera and music theatre. But for me, a rigorous distinction between these worlds isn't relevant. In my opinion, music theatre is a development and progression of opera without doing opera a disservice, because it is there that the last hundred years has seen such an unbelievable amount of change. It is precisely in opera that so much has been elaborated, devised and further composed.

I am convinced that, precisely by immersing ourselves in the history of the arts, we create the possibility to develop further today.

And that is the attitude that I recognise in Benjamin. It is remarkable that his work can be placed alongside that of Dick Raaijmakers without being considered trivial or intellectual copies; Raaijmakers who also conducted research and produced within a historical context. It is a way of working characterised by an unceasing, intrinsic development, precisely because he isn't interested in contemporary popularity, precisely because he isn't interested in quick success, but because he is sustained by a sincere, inner necessity to express a spirit of living.

Paul Koek