

Interview with Nicoline van Harskamp

by Ceci Moss



Nicoline van Harskamp, *Any Other Business* (Stage) (Photograph by Willem Sluyterman van Loo)

On June 18th at 7pm, artist [Nicoline van Harskamp](#) will present for the first time in the U.S. her performance work [Expressive Power Series Part 1: Max Bonner on the Phenomenology of Speech](#) at [the New Museum](#), an event part of Rhizome's [New Silent Series](#). Her practice investigates the political implications of language and speech, and her pieces often take the form of performance. Van Harskamp took some time to answer a few questions regarding her upcoming *Expressive Power Series Part 1: Max Bonner on the Phenomenology of Speech*.

What of your other projects and/or research may have laid the groundwork for *Expressive Power Series Part 1*?

The performance takes as its basis the script for [Any Other Business](#), a 6-hour performance that I made last year, set in a conference center in Amsterdam. I wanted to bring out the central thesis of that work, to summarize it down to an hour in a way. So, for *Expressive Power Series Part 1*, I took four of its most contradictory and most outspoken characters and planted them in a seminar room of an art center. During the

6-hour Any Other Business piece, the characters never get to speak to each other, but are merely juxtaposed. In the new piece, I wanted them to confront each other directly. And when writing their new lines, they started to say things they didn't say before.

Things that I learned or heard since last year; things that I am working on for new pieces; things that I was thinking about a long time ago and that suddenly seemed relevant again. They ended up summarizing my own thinking at the moment, in a way representing the voices in my own head that argue over topics that are central to my work. Whiff does it from a radicalist point of view; Alexandra from a humanitarian point of view; Mrs. Malik from an academic point of view; and Max, the consultant, from a reformist or (semi-) scientific point of view. In the piece, I am the person handing the microphones to various characters, indicating who I want to hear at what moment.

As a result of that, perhaps, I simultaneously, and to an equal extent, agree and disagree with each of the characters. To the audience, I want them to be equally sympathetic and unsympathetic. It's a bit like a morality play with rather confused personifications. There is no center to their debate; no plot in the script; nobody wins or loses. In a way that's how thought works (for me, at least) and what makes it productive. I hope that I can extend some of this to the audience, too.



Nicoline van Harskamp, Any Other Business (audience) (Photograph by Willem Shuyterman van Loo)

Some of your works derive from real historical circumstances or characters, such as [Yours In Solidarity](#) which centered on the anarchist

Karl Max Kreuger. Are any of the characters in Expressive Power Series Part 1 based on real, historical figures?

For all my scripts I use existing audio or video footage that I find or that I produce, myself. I interview people or set up a debate and then use the transcriptions. Or I ask for the recordings of a meeting I have attended or heard about. I also write myself into the scripts, but never from a blank Word file. Instead, I record occasions where I speak in public, and then transcribe my own words in order to get a more distanced account of my own language. I try to avoid books and theory, instead using YouTubed conferences or published conversations and speeches. I also like autobiographies as they are set in the first person and can be very useful. At the moment, I am using an anarchist archive, with personal correspondence also set in the first person. There is an informal, improvised quality to the language that I use. The personalities of speakers come through their statements. An unfinished sentence, for example, can be very telling and productive for a script.

But I never represent a single person directly. I do not make re-enactments of existing moments of the distant or recent past. The characters I create are always collages of lots of different people; their lines made up of lots of different voices. The material is so heavily edited, sometimes with three people in one sentence, that it would be hard to quote anyone directly and I doubt that anyone would recognize my source material.

But since you're asking: in Expressive Power Series Part 1, as I said before, I have gone a bit wild on the source material. I have recycled almost everything I have used in the past, and added new things to it. The script has traces of Emma Goldman, Peter Gelderloos, Gayatri Spivak, Marshall Rosenberg, Mikhail Bakhtin, Grinder and Bandler, Michel Foucault, Margaret Thatcher, Hannah Arendt and a very large number of lesser known individuals.



Nicoline van Harskamp, The Power of Listening (stage) (Video Still)

With Max Bonner's presentation of Personal Dynamics, it seems like part of the Expressive Power Series Part 1 performance will have a corporate workshop element, one that might be not only directed at the fellow actors but the audience as well. What role will the audience play in this performance?

The pieces don't take place in a theatrical setting, but in contexts appropriate to the subject matter: a conference centre, a seminar room, a classroom. They are places where people normally sit and listen and that have of course some theatrical aspect to them already. But I never try to trick people into thinking that the situation is real. I want the impact of the work to go beyond that sense of confusion. The works are announced as 'a scripted debate', 'a scripted conference', and so on. So really, the ideal audience for me is one that simply attends the performance as if it were attending a seminar or a talk.

In many of my works I plant actors in the audience for theatrical, conceptual and perhaps even dialectical reasons. They interfere with the 'performance' on stage in a very precisely timed and fully scripted way. The actors sometimes complain that I don't allow for any improvisation at all, but creating an impromptu situation that still makes sense in terms of content, takes a lot attention to detail. So the performances are very controlled, much more than you'd think when you see them.

Paradoxically, the more effective the pieces are, the more likely it is that actual audience members take them for participatory works. There's been a lot of 'audience contributions' over time, so by now I built an exit strategy in each piece. That is, I appoint one character to bring the interruption to a hold and give a cue to the others where to continue in the script. At the premiere in Rotterdam, we certainly needed that strategy, as we had an angry walk-out situation. But at that same premiere there were people who, despite knowing me or my work, couldn't help themselves whispering encouraging words to characters having a hard time. It's a real achievement of the actors that they managed to make people suspend their disbelief for the duration of the performance. I hope they'll do that again in New York!

You've already staged Expressive Power Series Part 1 at the Witte de With in Rotterdam this May, and after the June 18th event at the New Museum, the performance will take place again at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in August. You use different cast members in each performance, correct? Does this change or modify the bounds of the performance at all? If so, is that the intent?

The heart of this and all the other performances is the script. A good script can and should be played over and over again, in different versions and interpretations. I've heard actors say that in theater, a piece starts, not ends, with its first performance. That's quite different from an average art production, where you open a show with a

work that is finished and done. I would say that the medium of performance has an element of both worlds. The script and concept is unchangeable, but the execution is open to changes. Performance has an element of repetition in it, and restaging it in different contexts is one of its greatest potentials.

Expressive Power Series Part 1 is the first time I work with (partly) different casts for the same piece. Two of the four Dutch cast (native English speakers based in Amsterdam) will be in New York, the other two are local New York actors. Although any skilled and well-cast actor can play this piece, I would never say that actors are interchangeable. Their input makes or breaks the work, I am very well aware. So I think that in New York we might end up with a slightly different piece than in Rotterdam. I am very excited to see what happens.