

## **The Better to \_\_\_\_\_ you by Some thoughts on Aernout Mik**

By Anne Walsh

For ICA London, spring 2000 and Berlin Biennale catalogue, 2000

### **I. Prosthetic**

*"From this time on familiarity began and I like familiarity. It does not in me breed contempt it just breeds familiarity. And the more familiar a thing is the more there is to be familiar with. And so my familiarity began and kept on being."*

*Gertrude Stein, Lectures in America, 1935*

As a prosthesis for the work of Aernout Mik, this brochure is deceptive on at least two counts. First, because your body is one of Mik's raw materials, and to elucidate meaning from Mik's videos alone is to ignore that you have a body. Like the people in his situations—live and on tape—he perceives you as *being* a body rather than *having* one. Second, because this brochure is a verbal tour with two guides—myself, and Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen—who speak. It starts in one place and ends in another, it has a finish line. For this to be a really effective prosthesis, the guides would be indistinguishable from their words. The brochure itself would be indistinguishable from its subject, and the hybrid guide-word-brochure-being would circle, oscillate, float, collapse, swing, and slide wordlessly into your reality, now overlapping, perhaps, with Aernout Mik's.

American film and sound editor Walter Murch theorizes that moviegoers understand and accept the discontinuity of visual edits because we experience something like them nightly in our dreams, but also daily, micro-daily, in the blinking of our eyes. Blinks are mental cuts, says Murch, marking the end of one thought, the beginning of another. They render the stream of perceptual reality we receive from our eyes discontinuous, and thus psychically manageable.

Mik's situations, live and on video, repeat subtly and continue; people carry on their purposeless activities—like the voluntary conscripts of a benign circle of hell—watched by a camera eye that seems never to blink. Loop, loop, loop, a thought that turns and returns rather than changes, an eye that stays open: scanning, approaching, and retreating. The better to see by! But what "sin" are we and Mik's

other subjects expiating? Perhaps it's the hubris of knowing the world through the eyes alone.

## 2. Building

*“It is my overall concern to reveal people as they are engaged in various kinds of activities — alone, with each other, with objects — and to weight the quality of the human body toward that of objects and away from the superstylization of the dancer. Interaction and cooperation on the one hand; substantiality and inertia on the other.”*

*Yvonne Rainer, 1964*

Everyone who works above ground at Disneyland is known to Disney *Human Services* as a “cast member,” whether they flirt with guests in a Minnie Mouse costume, load them into the spinning teacup ride, or sell them hot dogs on a stick. A vast subterranean hive supplies and runs the kingdom, swiftly correcting any anomalies in the flawless execution of of the script, and *Securityland's* cast members correct any errant guest behavior, i.e. the forgetting of one's place as an extra.

In Aernout Mik's *Three Crowds* you find yourself navigating, with other viewers, an odd sort of habitat for bodies and images. Not one of you knows the rules of walls that curve, bloat, and contract, walls that separate you from people you can hear directly, but can see only by video relay, walls with holes you could crawl but not walk through. This space does not dictate the playing out of any known narrative. How are you to *be* there?

It's deceptive, again, to think of Mik's architecture only as an environment for viewing his live and taped images. Because while it is that, it also *does* what his images do: it throws you back to the materiality of your own being. These illogical spaces put everyone who's there in the same wobbly, but potentially liberating boat. The rules of conduct relative to built space begin to seem more arbitrary and more conventional, like your own language does when you start to learn a new one, or you try to teach it to a person who doesn't speak it. Or you talk to an animal. The coexistence of multiple realities begins to feel like a certainty. And at the same time, the notion of certainty feels blessedly irrelevant.

### 3. Membrane

*“There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown...It is only in a crowd that man can become free of this fear of being touched. That is the only situation in which the fear changes into its opposite. The crowd he needs is the dense crowd, in which body is pressed to body: a crowd, too, whose psychological constitution is also dense, or compact, so that he no longer notices who it is that presses against him. As soon as a man has surrendered himself to the crowd, he ceases to fear its touch. Ideally, all are equal there; no distinctions count, not even that of sex. Suddenly it is as though everything were happening in one and the same body...the more fiercely people press together, the more certain they feel that they do not fear each other.”*

*Elias Canetti, Crowds and Power, 1960*

When a cathedral is gone, what's lost is not just a building, a monument, but an acoustic object, a specific way sound is experienced. Stone that's been touched by bodies and the elements for thousands of years creates an acoustic environment that cannot be recreated.

Human beings—extras, crowds—inhabit Mik's silent videos, occupied with a range of intelligible, but nonsensical acts. (Is waiting an active or passive action?) Images of people or objects squirting, smashing, sucking, spitting, bouncing, wrestling, breathing are easy, pleasurable, and almost impossible *not* to mentally add sound to. But it's never vocal speech we add to what we see; to do so would be both irrelevant and redundant. Speech, in Mik's social spaces, does not occupy a privileged position in a hierarchy of communication practices, because subjectivity as an artifact, consequence or reward of language is not his concern. We watch people being or doing things together, but they don't visibly get anything from that group experience, say a feeling of “community” or “understanding.” There is no narrative payoff for us or them, only the assurance of constant presence, touch, and breath. Of what purpose are strict distinctions between people, objects, and the territory they occupy, wonders Mik. Perhaps, says he, communication might well be understood as warm bodies present together in space.

- ANNE WALSH

Anne Walsh is an artist who lives in Los Angeles. She recently curated "Tender Habitat," an exhibition of three works by Aernout Mik at the University of Michigan,

Ann Arbor. She is the co-founder of ARCHIVE, which produces spoken word works and unusual sound artifacts on compact disc and video.