



Ceramic shoes (untitled), 2020

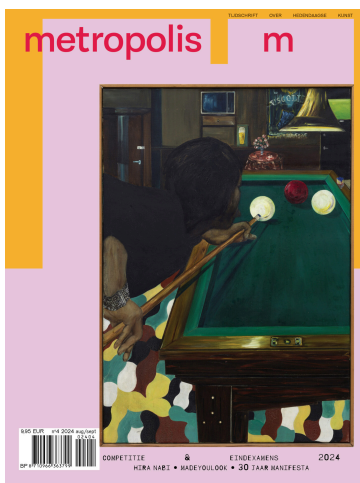
Grasping intimacy – in conversation with Verena Blok

Agnieszka Wodzińska

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feature

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Embracing, but also suppressing each other: the sculptures, photographs, and work-in-progress video Verena Blok exhibited

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to explore the tension between looking and being looked at.

Agnieszka Wodzińska speaks with Blok about her intimate work, inspired by Polish relatives, generational differences and meaningful encounters.

Over the last few years, I had been watching Poland – my home country – twist itself in knots and form into something hateful and rather difficult to grasp. When I was seeking ways to process the current Polish leaders' populist rhetoric, I stumbled upon Verena Blok's video installation *Robota* (2018) at the group show *Freedom of Movement* at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. It follows two Polish brothers, both labour workers in Western Europe, as they spend their summer in the lake district of Mazury. Close-ups of the men's bodies in motion and of stone sculptures interlace with Verena's conversations with the men who simultaneously promote and suffer from prejudice. *Robota* shows how a climate of economic hardship and post-Soviet precarity make space for a hateful rhetoric that positions Poles as the martyrs of Europe and the only ones capable of saving it from a feared and fabricated "otherness." Using this work as a starting point, I spoke to Verena about these contradictions, as well as her experience at Rijksakademie, working with ceramics, and her ongoing interest in exploring the dynamics between artist and subject.

Agnieszka Wodzińska

You became a resident at Rijksakademie at the beginning of 2020. What was it like to work in the space over the last year and a half? Did you have an idea of what you were going to make when you first started?

Verena Blok

'I had big plans when I started the residency and was very excited to have my own studio for the first time. I had always shared studios in the past and treated them as a place to review material and archive my prints, negatives, hard drives, etc. Making *Robota* was a turning point for me in how to tell a story in other ways than photography, although it is for me still a very photographic work. The encounter between subject and viewer is the foundation of my whole practice; using sound and moving image to explore this tension between these elements was very exciting. It turned out to be a very natural way of creation and I really wanted to develop a

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Verena Blok's Rijksakademie Open Studio 2021, photographer:
Tomek Dersu Aaron, 2021



Verena Blok's Rijksakademie Open Studio 2021, photographer: Tomek Dersu Aaron, 2021

Agnieszka Wodzińska

At the Open Studios, you showed some photographs, a single-channel video installation, and ceramic shoes. Can you tell me more about this turn towards clay?

Verena Blok

'I thought it would make sense to start experimenting with it, because it is also about materiality and being close to your subject, really nurturing this living thing that is fragile and, I don't know, can collapse... It's kind of alive. It needs care, attention, patience, it's also hard to control, just like people in a way [laughter.] When I started the residency, we had six weeks of a "normal" residency experience: moving into the studio, meeting people, dinners, parties, everything. And then the lockdown happened. Every contact became a potential threat and I quickly realized that it's not the best moment to look for protagonists for my film. So, I decided to spend this "in limbo" time in the ceramic workshop to focus on something completely new.

One of the first connections I made at the Rijksakademie was the ceramic technician, Marianne Peijnenburg. I spent so much time with her on the

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Chinese objects are really about and how I feel about them. Thinking about how you share space with an object like you share space with a human. I had this idea to work on a bigger sculpture, but I thought I'd start with shoes. I was looking through old family albums from my Polish family and I saw all my *ciocias* [aunts] and my mum and my *babcia* [grandma] when I was small, in the 90s. I spent long summer months there every year. I was looking at their shoes and I thought they were so cool. There was something touching about them. Shoes are these objects that bring you places, they go with you everywhere and get worn out, just like the bodies wearing them. There's a lot of texture and skin and personality there. When I started making these shoes, they looked a bit funny. They claim space because they look weird, ugly, odd. I liked the shoes more when they were still moist and kind of wet. I thought that I had to use glaze because that's what you do with ceramics, but when they came out of the oven, they looked so varnished and so new when they are actually worn shoes. They became these untouchable art objects and I felt very distanced from them. But I love their colours. The red shoes signify this youthful sexiness, women often tend to stop wearing bright colours as they age and slowly switch to more earthy tones, which is also about this slow invisibility of older women, something that I started researching later.'

'The red shoes signify this youthful sexiness – women often tend to stop wearing bright colours as they age and slowly switch to more earthy tones. This slow invisibility of older women is something that I started researching later'

Agnieszka Wodzińska

When you photograph or record footage, you pay a lot of attention to the dynamic you have with your subjects. Can you elaborate on this aspect of your work?

Verena Blok

'The relationship with the person I work with is important to me and cannot be developed in a day. It is about trust and spending time together, being open to what happens. I started filming for this new project in Poland with a friend last summer but couldn't return for more footage. So, I did a few casting calls in The Netherlands: Polish women, Dutch women, from

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Johanna Ter Steege, an established Dutch actress, who I saw in a film my former teacher had made. I was absolutely mesmerized by her and figured I could just see if she would be interested at all. I actually read somewhere that she was supposed to play a Polish woman in a film by Stanley Kubrick that was never made. I explained my initial ideas to her, and she agreed to do it after one conversation. I was so happy to see that even in times of a pandemic and chaos, people are still open to surprise and spontaneity, and new experiences. I will cherish this encounter with her forever. It was a challenging process, because it was the first kind of fictional work I was making and my first time working with an actress. And with a sound recorder, even a camera woman! It was like I had to reverse my brain, it felt so unnatural to me to define everything beforehand. Eventually I went back to filming and recording everything myself, which was much better.'

Agnieszka Wodzińska

Can you tell me more about this work in progress? Are there any details that stood out to you?

Verena Blok

'The scene where many things come together is the one with the sunglasses, where she notices me and the camera. She is actually reading a script. The camera becomes the subject of her gaze. It's about her taking back her space, about a certain refusal: *I see you too.*'

'The camera becomes the subject of her gaze.
It's about her taking back her space, about a
certain refusal: *I see you too.*'

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Verena Blok, film still, work in progress, 2021

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Verena Blok, film still, work in progress, 2021

Agnieszka Wodzińska

That scene feels so fresh because as viewers, we are used to looking at women, and at actresses especially, observing them. Suddenly, she looks back at us, but the dark sunglasses deny us access to her eyes and her expressions. The dynamic changes.

Verena Blok

‘Yes! During this sunny weather recently, I kept seeing all these women in public space wearing their sunglasses. They felt very present, like they owned the street. I usually experience men taking so much physical space when walking on the pavement, like there’s no room left others. Anyway, sunglasses protect the eyes against bright light but are also a mask, seeing through them without being seen. It’s impossible to read someone when speaking to a person wearing sunglasses. There’s a lot of control and agency in there, together with this element of desire and mystery. I also like that they are luxury objects that became accessible for everyone really, in all materials and designs.’

Agnieszka Wodzińska

Verena Blok

‘My mother is a cultural anthropologist and taught a course on Gender & Sexuality for years, so it has always been a big part of my life. She taught me not to look at gender as a given, but to question it, the assumptions that we have about it. I’m very close to my mother, it’s been me and her basically. As an only child I was used to being surrounded by mostly women much older than me, all very different. Some career driven, others excelling in motherhood, again others very religious and devoted. I watched them age and noticed how the attitude towards them changed. Middle-aged women and women after menopause slowly become less visible in our society. There are very few main roles in cinema written for women in this age group, also almost no main protagonists in literature. Of course, there are exceptions, but our society is still defining femininity in a particular way in terms of youth and physical appearance. This focus in my work is not very conscious; it’s just the bodies that I’m familiar with. I’ve been surrounded with them my whole life. I’ve experienced so much warmth and love from those older bodies. Menopause is slowly becoming a topic that is more openly spoken about, but there is still a lot of discomfort that is not fully understood yet. Women go through so much physical pain in their lives, women always being perceived as not being able to handle anything when we actually *do* handle everything.’

Agnieszka Wodzińska

Yes, and we often do so in silence. We might share experiences with each other, but they are still not widely addressed or even perceived.

Verena Blok

‘Right. So, I think it’s also this silence and journeys of pain that I find very touching and profound.’

Agnieszka Wodzińska

Is your grandmother in the photographs you showed at the Open Studios?

Verena Blok

‘Yes, here she was looking at this double rainbow. I love all those deep, intense wrinkles on her face. I thought, oh, there’s so much in these wrinkles. I’m just amazed at how bodies move through the world, how they’re seen and experienced and what they endure and what kind of imprint they leave in a shoe or how their voices tremble. And then with

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so scared of otherness. They are very fragile in this piece, although their bodies suggest otherwise. Just like these football players running like an unstoppable force for the Euro Cup now. I just watch the games for the close-ups really, the emotional intensity in the silence before shooting penalties. It's almost like cinema.'



Verena Blok, "Babcia Hiding," 2020

Agnieszka Wodzińska

Your interest in bodies shows up a lot through texture – clay connects to that too. When you were describing working with it, it sounded very intimate. Like grasping for that intimacy you were used to having.

Verena Blok

'Exactly. This year I reflected on things I could not do or experience at the time, but I found it in other unexpected places, like in the ceramic and plaster workshop. I made a mould from tissues my mom keeps in her purse, the million ways they can be used and folded. I missed emotional connections with people that I had so much looked forward to at the Rijksakademie. It was challenging for me to find closeness within the

Agnieszka Wodzińska

There is some physical closeness in the video as well, where the woman and her daughter practice self-defence in their living room. Why did you choose to include that?

Verena Blok

‘When my mother asked me to take self-defence classes when I was a teenager, I didn’t understand why. I eventually realized that it is because I am a girl living in a world that demands her to protect herself from men. Eventually the self-defence became too much of a subject in the film, but what was interesting is the mother’s good intention, wanting to teach her daughter, but having to perform horrifying situations and techniques for her to protect herself from abuse. There is no other way. In terms of aesthetics and from a cinematic point of view, I wanted to show the two women entangled, kind of like an embrace, but also suppressing each other, blurring the boundaries between their bodies. It also speaks to the generational difference. Older women perceive the female body and its agency in a different ways than younger generations. The self-defence training with Johanna and her daughter Hanna was great and very empowering, with lots of shouting and laughing, sweating, and sneezing. It felt very liberating. I wish I had a recording of Johanna laughing because she has a beautiful laugh.’

‘When my mother asked me to take self-defence classes when I was a teenager, I didn’t understand why. I eventually realized that it is because I am a girl living in a world that demands her to protect herself from men’



Verena Blok, film still, work in progress, 2021

Agnieszka Wodzińska

And you can explore this with her further. After showing the work during the Open Studios, do you want to continue filming with her?

Verena Blok

‘Yes, definitely. My friend and artist Maja Klaassens who helped me develop the scenario told me, *you have a lot of Christmas presents, but there’s no Christmas tree yet*. I need to develop the structure more. I imagine everything in images and never wrote a scene in my life. It was great to discuss this with Johanna, to be somewhat on the same page.’

Agnieszka Wodzińska

So, you can discuss the creative process with actors and performers more openly. And I assume it happens with other participants too, but is that exchange more intuitive?

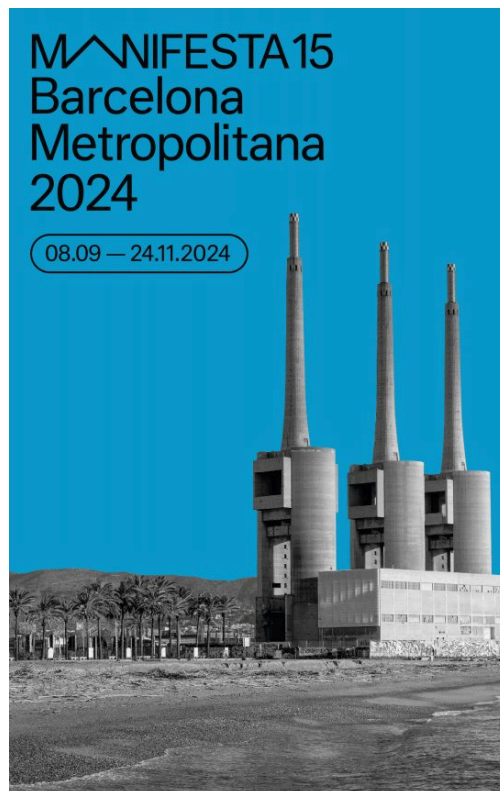
Verena Blok

‘Usually it’s quite intuitive and more practical. I remember talking to one of the boys from *Robota* about wanting to do a swimming scene. They

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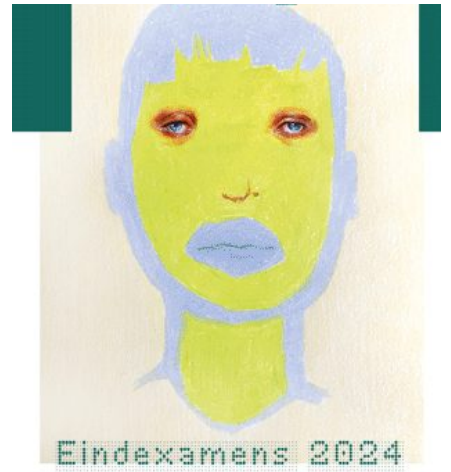
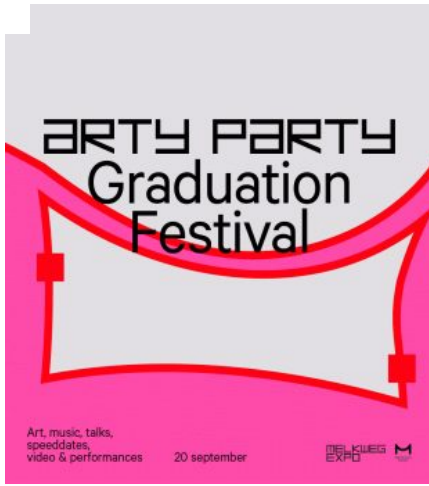
...filming and spending time together. I don't know how to work with people in any other way. In that sense I think I am kind of like my mom, just endlessly fascinated by people.'

Agnieszka Wodzińska
is a writer and art historian



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