

Episode of the Sea

Lonnie van Brummelen and Siebren de Haan



The film *Episode of the Sea* is the outcome of a two-year collaboration between Dutch artists Lonnie Van Brummelen and Siebren de Haan with the fishing community of Urk, a former island in the Netherlands. In the previous century, the Dutch closed off and drained their inland sea to reclaim new arable land. The island of Urk, situated in mid sea, suddenly found itself embraced by land. Its inhabitants were expected to switch from fishing to farming, but the fishermen managed to continue their trade. They found new fishing grounds, far out in the North Sea. Despite being part of the mainland for decades, the fishing village is still notoriously insular and its inhabitants continue to speak their own dialect. The film documents the material world of contemporary North Sea fishery and the fishermen's struggle with a changed public perception, fluctuating regulations, and excessive global competition, while parallels are drawn between fishing and filming.

The following is an edited conversation about the film between Lotte Arndt, Lonnie van Brummelen and Siebren de Haan.

LA **Siebre, Lonnie, I am very happy we have the opportunity to discuss your very rich film on the occasion of its screening at Gallery TPW. There is probably no better context for the work than this, a lens-based gallery which previously served as a cold storage facility for the wholesaler North Atlantic Fisheries.**

***Episode of the Sea*, a black-and-white experimental documentary, is structured into several chapters or multiple episodes working with the fishing community of Urk, yet you chose a title in the singular. Is this a framing strategy to give more attention to the sea itself as a central *actant* (in the sense of Bruno Latour's concept of a non-human agent) and to shift the film's perspective away from a story centered on humans?**

LVB/SDH The 'sea' in the title indeed proposes a shift from a human perspective towards the sea as a force of its own, a force much more expansive and sweeping than any human effort will ever be. At the same time 'episode of the sea' suggests something paradoxical: that an entity as forceful, vast and continuous as the sea can be finite. The film starts with a scene in which women describe the ecological catastrophe that occurred when the sea dried up. It forecasts the ending of ways of life that have been passed on from mythical time.

Episode of the Sea also happens to be the subtitle of *La Terra Trema*, the film Visconti recorded in 1948 in the Sicilian fishing village Aci Trezza. In his neorealist drama the inhabitants of the village perform the roles of fishermen who are – like the Urkers – exploited by wholesalers. The film was supposed to become the first part of a triptych, but in the end Visconti only filmed the sea-episode.

For us the title equally refers to our own period of drifting outside the arts; our *'three years without art'*, to cite the artist/activist Gustav Metzger. He suggested in the 1970's that all artists should have 'Jahre ohne Kunst' (years without art), to revolt against the capitalist mode of production that dominated the art system. In the current neoliberal climate, we felt his call was still appropriate.

GLOBAL ECONOMICS: FAR AND CLOSE

LA **How did the decision to work with the fishing community of Urk come about?**

LVB/SDH We've always had a particular interest in how transnational economic and political dynamics transform local landscapes. In 2005 we made the film installation *Grossraum (Borders of Europe)* consisting of a silent 35mm film that explores the landscape along Europe's outside borders and a publication expressing the long trajectory of seeking permissions that preceded the actual film recordings. In later works we investigated the impact of Europe's trade barriers in Nigeria; and traced migratory movements of artworks and people between Turkey and Europe. Having worked mainly abroad for many years, we wanted to find out more about the impact of global dynamics 'at home'; in the postindustrial society that we are part of.

LA **Indeed, the film shows the fishing industry as part of the global economy from the outset: before you as filmmakers even board the boat and go out to sea, there are scenes introducing the fish factory, where fish are sorted, skinned, sliced, and deep frozen. Dozens of workers stand along the production lines as they prepare the fish for export.**

LVB/SDH The postmodern nineties marked the emergence of a dematerializing tendency in

Western capitalist countries. The production of goods was transferred to the South and East and considered anachronistic – something *we* had left behind. Objects were no longer considered as *things* with physical characteristics and agency of their own. As artists, we too were asked to produce artworks with a press release to match, turning artistic production increasingly into a matter of linguistics.

When a Dutch regional museum invited us to do fieldwork in the fishing community of Urk, it felt like an opportunity to find out more about the ramifications of the globalized system in the Dutch landscape. We were also curious how fishermen, who do extremely physical work and organize their lives around such unmanageable forces as migrating fish, the sea and the weather, would cope with a system that largely denies the material world and has no appreciation for the recalcitrance of things.

SEARCHING FOR A COMMON GROUND

LA **Finding a terrain where practices converge is one of the major elements of the film. As you have previously written, you are coming to the fishermen as "strangers", looking at many things with astonishment, and working to gain their confidence. You underline this condition by naming one of the film's chapters "first encounter" – a common title in ethnographic writing. How did you find commonality and convergence when coming from fields as different as art and documentary practice and fishery?**

LVB/SDH We visited Urk for the first time in spring 2011. The Dutch government had just announced a stiff package of budget cuts for cultural spending and cultural producers were cast as scroungers for relying on



subsidies. A title towards the beginning of the film describes how we introduced ourselves to the fishing community as artists, and discreetly added that the reputation of our sector has recently suffered some damage. We loosely based the phrasing of these first lines on Malinowski's description of his arrival at the Trobriant islands in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922); a study that redefined ethnography by proposing intensive fieldwork and participatory observation as scientific method. It turned out we were not the only ones with a damaged reputation. The fishermen explained that they, too, are no longer seen as heroes of the sea. Nowadays they are blamed for fishing the world's oceans dry. The discovery of a shared image problem shaped the filmmaking process. It was clear from the beginning that the collaboration would entail mutual observation and inquiry.

Gradually we became aware of the conditions that caused the fishermen to scale up their

practice. In the period when the colonies became independent Urk's local fishing grounds were transformed into new farmland. The Urkers found new fishing grounds far out on the North Sea, but this required enlarging their ships. A few decades later, the European Commission introduced fishing quotas to protect fish stocks, a system that was also used to redistribute Europe's fishing activities. Great Britain received extra fishing rights to compensate for its industrial decline, while the Urkers were allotted less rights in an attempt to make their fishery shrink. But again Urk's fishermen found a loophole. They purchased ships from other European nations to gather extra quota, turning their local family businesses into multinationals. Meanwhile international free trade treaties turned flatfish caught in the North Sea into generic 'white fish' on the international market. The massive influx of farmed fish from Asia (Pangasius, Tilapia) resulted in plummeting fish prices.

Over the past decades, the fishermen have surely caught more fish than has been good for the sea. But there are more parties involved. In the end, aren't we all unwillingly squandering the earth's materials? This is also a terrain we share.

MATERIALITY, FICTION AND REALISM

LA Throughout the film you use performed narration of scripted texts that were developed from transcripts of conversations you had with the Urkers. These parts are staged in their real workplaces – dockyards and so on. Alongside the work of filmmaker and anthropologist Jean Rouch, you refer to this as a practice of 'ethnofiction': fiction in the service of realism. It entails speculation and ambivalence.

The first scene – a prologue – is performed by seven women, a counterpoint to the largely male-dominated sea-scenes. It's shot in a deliberately surprising environment: on a



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EPISODE OF THE SEA, 2014, FILM STILL,
 35MM TRANSFERRED TO 4K AND HD.

green field, surrounded by a forest. As we learn later on, this area was actually sea before being drained by the Dutch government in the middle of the twentieth century. The Urkers were not given a choice, and their island was forcibly made part of the mainland. This is not only a process of internal colonization: the landscape appears here as the product of striking transformations – political, environmental and social alike. One of the key questions in *Episode of the Sea* is to what extent the materiality of things testify to these stories.

LVB/SDH In some areas of the polder land that envelops Urk, old lighthouses surrounded by grazing cows are reminders of how the new land was created on a former seafloor, five meters below sea level. Also boulders, that surfaced when the sea was drained, are manifestations of earlier landscapes. They were brought to the area by glacial action, many millennia ago. The opening sequence presents women in a field of erratic boulders, nowadays a natural reserve next to Urk. Birds are singing, the wind rustles in the trees. Perhaps not exactly the beginning one expects from a film about a fishing community and the sea. But for us the scenery introduces a

sort of deep time before humans existed. After the drainage of the sea, nature had to find a new balance, and the Urkers lived through this period of resettling. They experienced how the fish died when the salt water turned fresh; how the rotten fish bodies attracted hordes of insects; and how these drew birds whose excrements caused vegetation to die and polluted the drinking water. Other plagues followed. These ecological torments are recited by women that are standing in the field of boulders. It gives a glimpse of the relentless forces of nature that shaped the soil, the trees.

MEANS OF PRODUCTION

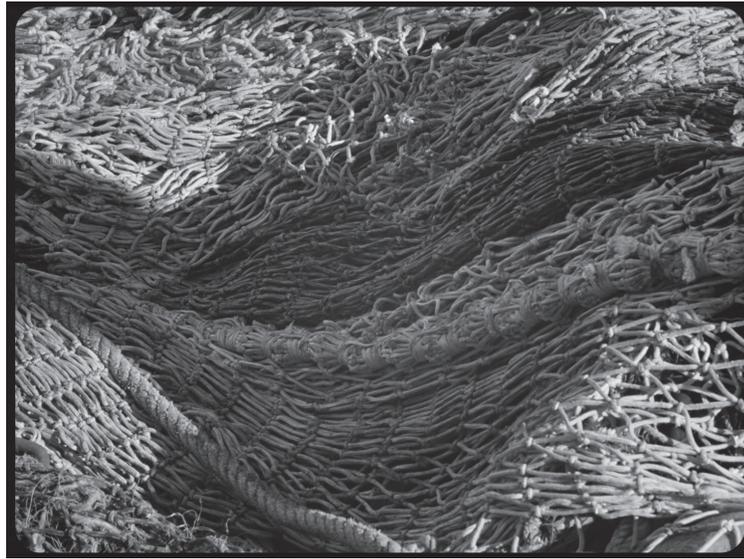
LA **Throughout the film, a constant preoccupation for the fishermen is the need to improve their equipment, to renew means of production, and hire a cheaper workforce. The Urkers even asked you to add a scene in the machine room of the ship that shows the fishermen changing a screw – an innovation they came up with to decrease fuel consumption and generate more power. The incessant focus on the means of production is a strong image speaking to the pressure of surviving economic competition.**

In contrast, you filmed (as you do usually) with a 35 mm camera from the 1980s, a model that needs recharging every 4 minutes and consumed a total of 8 km of film for the project, as one can read in the film's scrolling text. You didn't digitize the film until after shooting all the footage analogically. Shot in black and white, the grain of the images remain strong even after the transfer to digital. This differs considerably from the fishermen's mode of work: no constant upgrading to go quicker and cheaper, but instead insisting on a rather heavy procedure, slowing down the process, and introducing a material limitation.

LVB/SDH The Urkers inhabit a paradoxical world that attains its rhythm from ancestors, religion and the cycles of nature, but is simultaneously guided by market pragmatics. To us it seems that the fishermen adapt in order to reconcile their traditional way of life with the relentless demands of the neoliberal system. And is our situation very different? Often, the fishermen would explain their practice to us by recounting what their forefathers taught them, and we, too, explained why we worked like we did, by referring to Robert Flaherty's staged ethnography, or Straub/Huillet's rhythmical recitations by non-professional actors.



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Just like the fishermen are hesitant to give up the trade that has been passed on to them by their ancestors, our choice to record *Episode of the Sea* on analogue 35mm film is also motivated by our attachment to the long tradition that the celluloid medium embodies. But just like them we, too, need to comply with the demands of the ruling system. It's the new technological paradigm that forces us to present the film in all sorts of digital formats and that may in the end make us abandon the analogue medium altogether.

STRUCTURE: SCRIPTED NARRATIONS AND MATTER

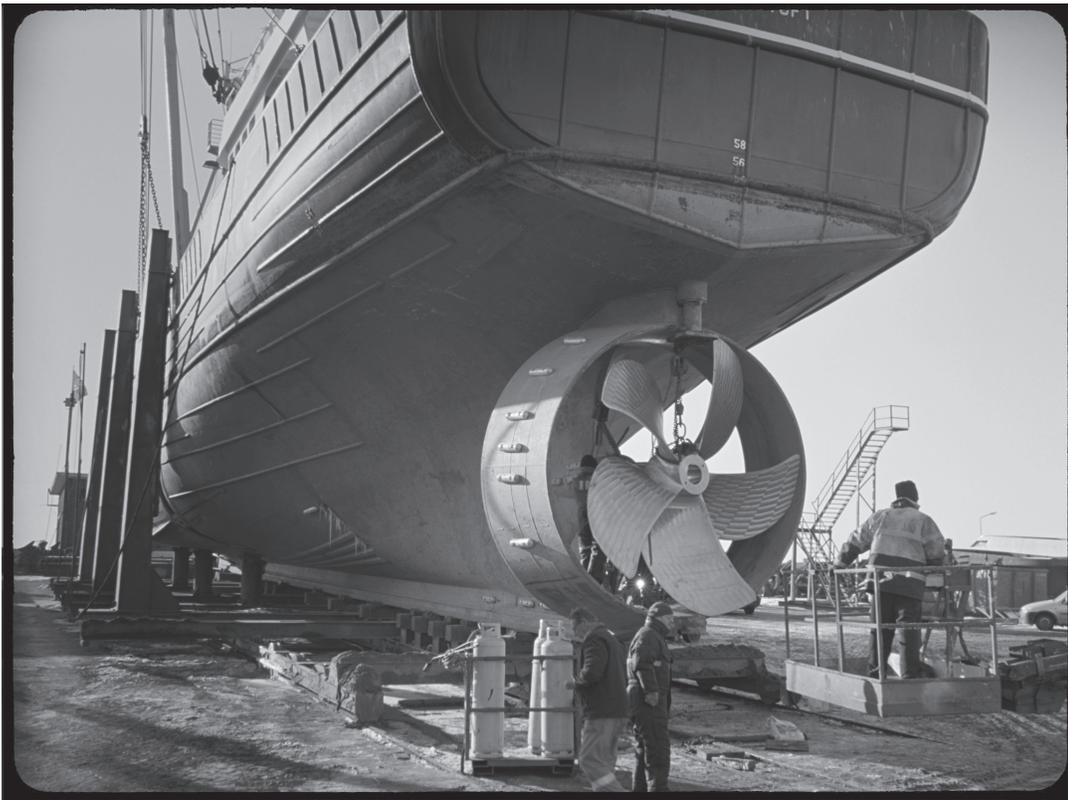
LA The film interweaves heterogeneous filmic languages. A first group of scenes is mostly mute, but equipped with a very present ambient sound (the ropes on the deck, the sound of the machines, the rhythm of the production lines...). These scenes show bodies and things at work: the factory processing of fish, the restless activity on the fishing boat, the repair of boat and nets, bringing in the fish ... – all showing bodies in action, bodies that have a knowledge of what they are doing,

having done it thousands of times. By the way they interact, these bodies and things eloquently testify to the relations constituted in the course of the work performed. This also includes the fish that are caught, the nets and tools, all are part of an amply rehearsed set of movements. Recorded by a camera standing firmly on its tripod, the fixed frames are traversed by all these elements.

A second kind of scene consists of performed dialogues, focusing on questions of economic survival, written based on interviews with (former) fishermen, and staged on the boat with Urkers as volunteer actors/performers. Formally, these scenes are intentionally static; the performers' bodies standing still, or executing very minimal gestures while performing their text. The staging is constantly visible, at one time symbolically announced by a clap, and later by clumsy acting. The Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* (distancing effect) is strong and impedes any kind of identification or immersion. The community narrates itself through a fictionalized and staged story that has been reprocessed by your eyes and ears.

The scenes are a strong counterpoint to the displayed text passages (mainly concentrated on *your reflections*) as they redirect attention to the preoccupations of the fishermen. Does this semi-fictional space allow the community to speak without being trapped in the representation of the “authentic voice”?

LVB/SDH The staging is, as you suggest, ‘at the service of realism’ and by realism we here don't mean creating a perfect illusion of reality. We experimented with an extended form of participation. In visual anthropology ‘participatory cinema’ is a method that allows the filmed subjects to take part in the filmmaking process, for example by inviting those who are filmed to give feedback. We wrote a script based on informal conversations with local fishermen, presented this to the inhabitants for feedback and asked them to perform the scenes in appropriate locations. This routine allowed the fishing community to speak for themselves without the suggestion of authenticity. After all, haven't we learned by now that a documentary is always a construction? We tried to open up the co-authorship further, by opting for



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picture frames that are wide and layered and by interrupting sentences and dialogues with long pauses, so that which often withdraws into the background can emerge.

LA A third kind of scene focuses on a single view and reduces movement to a minimum: a close up of the surface of the sea, the wooden deck of the ship, the ropes... Some of these images serve as backgrounds on which titles and text appear. These parts signal the chapters of the film, they have a narrative function and give a loose chronological structure (*The miracle of Urk, First encounter, Treading the boards, Extra identity, Image making, Contingency, Analogue worlds*). In these parts, your reflections have great authority: leaving the field of immediate action, they open up a space for your thoughts and further narrations. Dense, written information is superposed on the

calm images. Why did you opt for such an important role for text? And how do you relate it to the images in the background?

LVB/SDH The film has been the result of an encounter, and, although we share terrain, each participant has a voice of his or her own. The titles narrate how the exchange and collaboration developed from our perspective, and situate the shared effort. At the same time we looked for a way to allow nonhuman actors to present themselves. The title sequences combine textures and reverberations of reposing bodies with scrolling title sequences that in their own way provide a space for resonance. While nature speaks in its own rhythm, these parts introduce another continuity, like the ‘pancartes’ (or intertitles) of the silent era of filmmaking.

VIBRANT MATTER

LA **The bodies at work and the fish being processed are both taking part in an incessant transformative movement. Fish and material are here treated instrumentally, as objects. The still life-like images in the second group of scenes stand in sharp contrast to this dance of bodies and things. The composition is very careful, frames are defined calmly, things appear as isolated, beautiful and nearly abstract. Theorist Jane Bennett speaks of vibrant matter as the “vitality intrinsic to materiality” and here you seem to be searching for this vibrancy by interrupting the flow of things, by interrogating the object and its resistance to your gaze.**

LVB/SDH We visited the harbors not only when there was activity, but also on the weekend when the ships were docked and the fishermen had gone home to their families. We humans tend to think that human activity is what makes the world revolve, but things are not just there for us. All things, including people, are entangled in a collectivity through work, but are not “standing reserve” for this purpose, to use a term by Heidegger. Things also exist when we don't use them, and at any time they can retreat from service. The current globalized market system seems antithetical to such a sovereignty, but the Urker fishermen are used to working with forces of nature that cannot be controlled.

LA **Let me pick out one scene exemplifying this isolating gaze. It is a relatively short take on the deck, right when a heavy load of fish has been discharged. The wooden deck is still wet and the nets are already back in the water. The camera rests for a few seconds on a single remaining fish, lying on deck side by**

side with a starfish, as if composed for a still life. All activity of the fishing process ceases and this moment allows for a totally different perception of the single fish, which suddenly appears as an individual in a tragic situation. One can read this image as a search for a non-human perspective. But you can also see art-historical references to the Flemish 17th century fish still lifes: you show a highly composed image and shift the camera's gaze to its beauty, which is entirely secondary to the working process. How would you describe the perspective opened up by this attention to non-humans and to matter disconnected from its 'use'?

LVB/SDH The camera indeed doesn't always follow human activity, but also lingers on materials, things, animals. But being loyal to things doesn't mean we have access to their stories, that we can know them entirely. To us, these images reveal that things are more than what they mean to us. They point to the boundaries of our access to them. As Graham Harman puts it: “Staring at a hammer does not exhaust its depths, but neither does wielding that hammer on a construction site or a battlefield.”

The shot that you describe indeed may seem a still life. But the fish is still breathing, and a fishermen's shadow is passing without paying attention to the animal's death struggle. If we acknowledge that things and animals have a perspective of their own, isn't this image, then – instead of being a banquet to celebrate richness – a transgression from one state into another, a creature going through the circles of life and death?

LA **The point that I wanted to highlight is an aesthetic mode of vision you sometimes utilize: in another scene the ship's propeller is taken off the boat for repair. The scene begins with men working on a heavy boat that lies jacked up in the shipyard. The propeller is filmed again later in the shipyard's workshop. Now polished, it shines in silvery hues, and seems to be totally separated from its function. It appears as a sculpture, not defined by its use value but by aesthetic criteria. For a second, before becoming again part of the world of needs and uses, it appears as an autonomous form. It seems that in these moments, when the film searches for aspects of things that they refuse to disclose, these things appear as nearly timeless aesthetic objects?**

LVB/SDH In any film, images are instrumentalized in a narrative, however minimal it may be. But we noticed that images, like things, resist being merely signifiers in the service of continuity. They also tend to suspend the film's progress with their presence. Jacques Rancière describes this as an interplay of the representative regime – which pushes the narrative forward, and the aesthetic regime – which interrupts the stream of linear causality by giving redundant details. Perhaps one can say that in the moments where the images appear to halt time, the aesthetic regime takes over.

TIME AND THE IMAGE

LA **Accordingly, there are different temporalities attached to the images in the film. The bodies at work show the restless process of transformation of things and its specific temporality. Then you have the aestheticised**

frames of matter and things, which in contrast seem timeless. The images are slowed down. It is over these kinds of seductive still-life images that the text is displayed. Do these reflexive written passages require a more silent materiality of the images?

LVB/SDH The film alternates between working and reposing. Being at work entails participating in the choreography of moving bodies. We experienced this when we filmed on board the ship where we had to make sure to stay out of the unpredictable pathways of the nets, ropes, fish, and fishermen. Reposing bodies, on the other hand, are just there. The still life scenes, as you call them, present such bodies being by themselves. Being by oneself seems a prerequisite for pondering on work done, on positions taken. We don't mean to say here that we have full access to this 'selfhood' of things, not even to our own 'self', but these still lifes may remind us that things are also there when we don't use them. ■

Dutch artists **Lonnie van Brummelen** and **Siebren de Haan** have worked together since 2002, producing 16mm and 35mm film installations that explore cultural and geopolitical landscapes. Their films include *Grossraum* (2005), *Monument of Sugar* (2007), *Monument to Another Man's Fatherland* (2008), *View from the Acropolis* (2012), and *Episode of the Sea* (2014). **Van Brummelen** is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Amsterdam and the HKU. She's a tutor at HKU and a regular visiting professor at diverse Master programs. Venues where their works have been shown include Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Kunsthaus Zürich; Argos, Brussels; SMBA and De Appel Amsterdam; CCA Vilnius; the Shanghai and Guangju Biennials; IAC Villeurbanne, France. Their work is included in public collections of Les Abattoirs, Toulouse; MUDAM Luxembourg; FRAC Marseille; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Julia Stoschek Collection, Düsseldorf; Hoffmann Sammlung, Berlin; Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

Lotte Arndt

Based in Brussels, Lotte Arndt taught at the art school l'École d'art et design de Valence. She was researcher in residence at the art school l'École supérieure d'art de Clermont Métropole in 2013–2014 and currently she coordinates the artistic research project "Karawane" that accompanies the making of Vincent Meessen's and Katerina Gregos' Belgian pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale. She is part of the artists and researcher group Ruser l'image, and publishes regularly on topics regarding the postcolonial present and artistic strategies in pursuit of subverting Eurocentric institutions and narratives.

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