

Going Public: Yeb Wiersma's recent work

by Simone Ewenson

When I approached Dutch artist Yeb Wiersma with the prospect of writing an article, I was surprised to discover that our shared interests exceeded my expectations. While artist-in-residence at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces Yeb had handed over her portfolio for me to peruse, it was a small neatly packed box full of lushly documented projects and I was intrigued. By the time we met again I was eager to talk to Yeb about her interest in site-specific projects, her involvement with residency programs and her current activities in Melbourne.

Location features strongly in Yeb's practice and her ideas are formed from experiencing her immediate surroundings. Her work is site specific and simultaneously engages with public and private space. Within her work there is a sense of openness that allows her to stretch ideas, resulting in the subtle provocation of the unsuspecting viewer and often rousing a rethinking of one's initial response to her work. Yeb's interest in public space is based on a conscious desire to disrupt the norms of public life, which are full of rituals and manners. As she pushes and pulls invisible boundaries important questions are raised, such as 'How public is public space?'. Walking the streets – let's say around Federation Square – you gaze upon huge billboards. Advertising surrounds you and they can be the most obscene, tasteless images but as long as it says 'David Jones' or 'Versace' it is acceptable. Because it's advertising these unwritten rules apply. On the other hand, if I felt like making a small, innocent wall drawing it would be considered an intrusion and therefore removed. Walls are apparently not designed for spontaneous expressions, unless you have asked permission to do so. I always find it astounding that so-called 'public space' isn't public after all and that we (instinctively) behave differently when others are around. There is an interesting tension between the public and private in communal spaces, and in general this relation between what we show, what is visible, and what we do not show, what is invisible has always fascinated me. What you see is not always what you get.

Yeb has never felt that the formulation or presentation of her ideas should be limited to the traditional space of the gallery and studio, which makes me wonder where the ideas are conceived and formed. For some artists a studio environment works, but for Yeb it doesn't. She likes to see the world outside as "an endless sketchbook". Since graduating from art school in 2001 Yeb has endeavoured to find suitable working models, whereby the smaller activities such as drawing and taking photographs that help to sustain her larger projects are given space to breathe. In doing so she has sought out specific residency programs to provide herself with an intensive living and working environment away from the routine of everyday life. In 2003 the opportunity arose to take part in the Kulturzentrum Nairs residency program in The Engadin region in Switzerland. The residency, with its combined working and living spaces, is housed in the beautiful and vast 19th century spa resort Kurhaus Tarasp and the site is surrounded by ubiquitous misty valleys, eerie evergreen forests and snow-capped mountains. This presented an ideal physical and psychological landscape in which to delve deeper into her real and imagined childhood memories of this region.

This dark landscape conjured a memory from years earlier; as a setting for the fantastic tales of the Brothers Grimm and later the scenery travelled through on family holidays. As a child she would sneak out of bed and gripped with fear and excitement would listen to Grimm's fantastic tales on her parent's record player at dawn, which existed in stark contrast to the reality of the flat landscape of Holland where she grew up. Upon her arrival at Kurhaus Tarasp, Yeb immediately began developing a working process based on a more intuitive method of engaging in her practice in an attempt to shape those inexplicable memories. Outdoors she collected sticks and twigs and drew and photographed from the surrounding landscape. Indoors she explored the attics and sourced materials, such as woollen blankets once used by the patients, to make an assortment of knitted and sewn objects. *Growing Dark* was installed during her last week and cleverly considering the many



*Above and previous page: Yeb Wiersma
All images courtesy of the artist*



aspects of 'site' presented by the residency. Consisting of soft sculptural objects such as bunnies, arrows and guns, drawings of children encapsulated by trees and photographs of the mysterious picturesque landscape the work suggested disparate narratives and tableaux that the viewer could approach through their personal memories and experiences.

Yeb's observations and insights during her three-month stay at Kurhaus Tarasp prompted a another work. Working and living in this remote place in the Swiss mountains Yeb had begun to feel very connected to the landscape surrounding her as well as to the other artists living there and to the history of the site and to the wider region. She "became aware of the sometimes-itchy relations between the locals and foreigners" as the artists were called. Even though the residency has been operating for 12 years, to the villagers' the visiting artists are still considered the 'strange' people from the valley. This also brought a sense of freedom and fun for Yeb because, "like the idiots in the Lars Von Trier movie, assumptions are already made and suspicions are high". In playing with this idea she came across two German words that reflected the complex situation. The first word *Fremdenzimmer* when translated into English literally means 'room for strangers', put simply, vacancies or rooms available. The second word *Gastarbeiter* means 'guest worker' and in the political sense refers to the migrants from the Mediterranean who came to Western Europe in the 1960s looking for work. As long as they remained 'guests' they were welcomed because they worked hard for little money. Later when they wanted to stay and become citizens, with the same rights as everyone else, feelings towards them rapidly

changed. For Yeb "this attitude is very concerning" and is unfortunately very alive at the moment in Western Europe. By dividing up these two words into four smaller ones – *Fremd/strange*, *Gast/guest*, *Arbeit/work* and *Zimmer/room* – Yeb made inferences beyond her situation as an international artist-in-residence.

The outcome was the site-specific public work *Fremdarbei* that was erected on the outside of the spa building in February 2004. While resembling existing commercial signs advertising hotel rooms, *Fremdarbeit* differed slightly in that it had a dislocated carnivalesque quality about it. As these four words, stemming from a central vertical post measuring 15 metres high slowly lit up one letter at a time, the surrounding valley (that would have otherwise been engulfed in complete darkness) did too. The installation had quite a strong impact. First of all it was indeed surprising to see such an enormous radiation of bulb lights throughout the valley, and the whole scenery was a strange mixture of art installation and an advertising campaign.

Returning to Amsterdam Yeb truly missed the smell of the forest, of real nature. She noticed whenever she was walking through the city she was visibly relieved to enter small parks, bushes or places that simulated nature. Then the idea was born to make this 'longing' visible by literally sticking her head into these small artificial islands of green and trying to refresh, which for Yeb is "a perfume for the lungs". She thought this was funny in a way because here again she "could see the importance of a certain location on the work and a longing for an authentic experience with nature in an urban environment". For Yeb the "distinction between the 'wild and savage' and the constructed concepts of nature" became much more evident and the whole project turned out to be pretty absurd, embracing a kind of slapstick aesthetic.

In 2004 as artist-in-residence at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces Yeb continued work on an unfinished series of photographs of people sleeping in public libraries, which she had begun at the Cooper Union Art College, New York in 2001. She asserts that in Melbourne she was "struck by the impressive features of the State Library" and felt she could easily continue her *Departure* series here. While observing peoples' behaviour in the open public space of the Victorian State Library it was interesting for her to discover the ease and safety they felt in allowing themselves to fall asleep on the grass. For Yeb this was significant as "being asleep shows us in our most vulnerable state because we loose control of our consciousness". To her it was "quite beautiful to think that a library could provide this environment, this comfort. And Yeb hopes she will return to Melbourne in 2006 to exhibit these photographs in the public domain of the Library, returning the sleepers from whence they came.

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